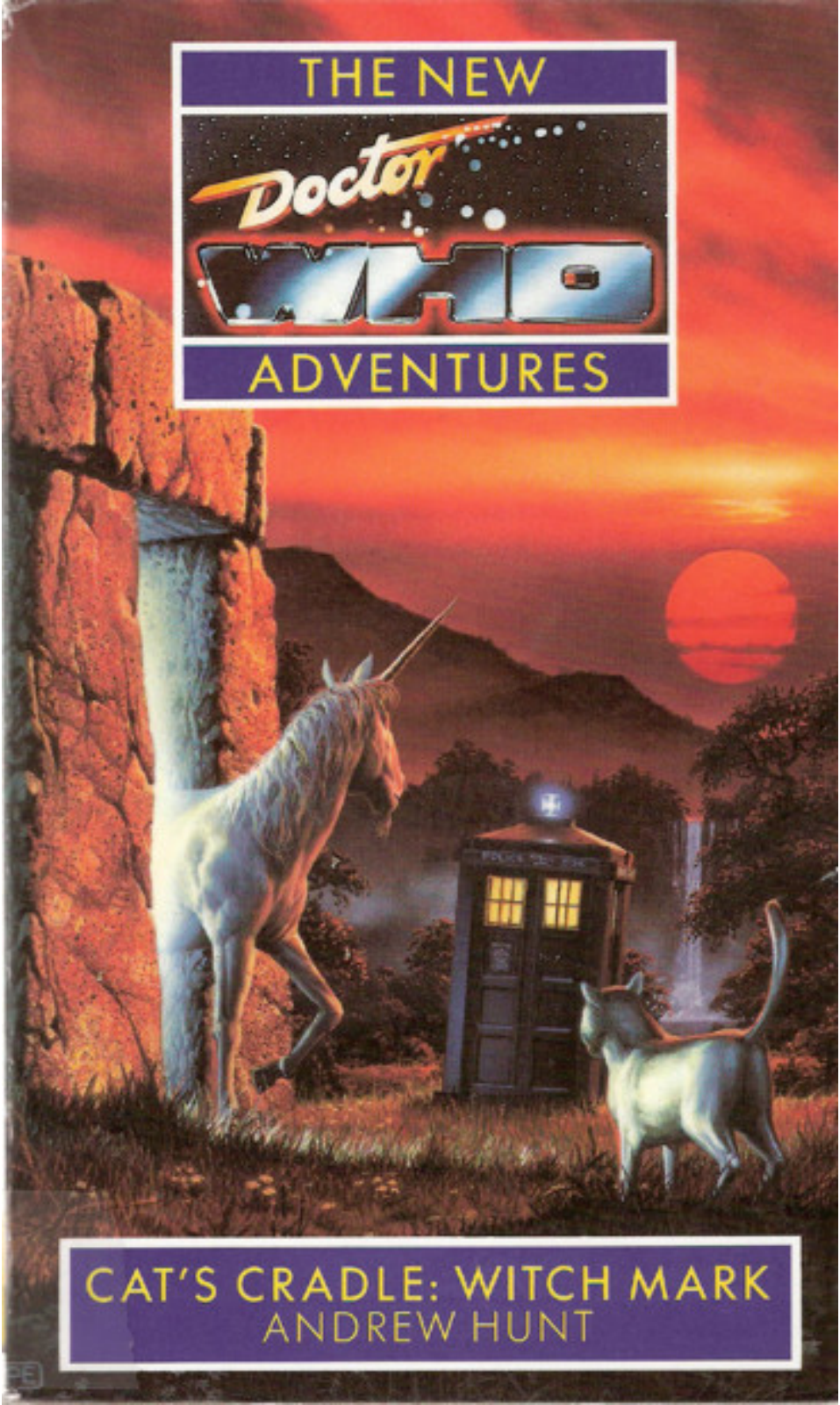
THE NEW
Doctor WHO
ADVENTURES
CAT'S CRADLE: WITCH MARK
ANDREW HUNT

Prologue

Bathsheba watched motes of dust dancing in the shaft of sunlight and let forth a heavy sigh. It earned her a stern glare from Siân but that didn't make the sentiment behind it any less heartfelt.

After fifteen days of solid rain, pounding the earth around the farm into a fury of mud, the sun had emerged from behind the heavy layers of cloud and Bathsheba had, found herself confined to the hay barn along with all the other children. It confirmed that this always happened, though Bathsheba had a long enough memory to recall being grateful at the sight of the raven-haired teacher strolling towards the farm at harvest time. Then Siân's lessons had brought Bathsheba a longed-for respite from h r fumbling attempts, doomed to failure, at using the scythe.

The scythe had been her father's idea. It needed two arms to wield the instrument properly, two good arms. To the shaft he had attached a leather thong which could be tightened around her right wrist and with her left arm she was just about able to swing it. But her efforts were useless; the blade either swung too low because she couldn't support it or it merely flattened the stalks. The exercise was intended to strengthen her right arm, which had been withered at birth, but gradually it became apparent that it did no such thing and so she was given a break from that work. Father had then given her the job of going round the field, after the grain had been flailed from the stalks and the hay stacked, to pick up all of the stray grains which had fallen. This job too was tiresome and, though it provided Bathsheba with time to free her imagination, before a very great time she began to hate tramping up and down fields.

Her attention turned back towards Siân. What had she been talking about? The last thing she could remember was something about Dinorben, the fortress where the council, the Tuatha De Danaan, held their meetings. Bathsheba had never been there, although at most it must be only two days' ride away.

She had seen pictures of the circle which was guarded night and day by General Nuada and his soldiers and she had heard stories, whispered late at night, about exactly *why* General Nuada and his soldiers guarded the circle so closely. And though she had never really left the farm her mind had ranged far and wide throughout the kingdom of Tír na n-Óg; to the Sidhe on the far western shores, to the ferocious waves which beat eternally against the hospitable islands in the distant north, to the Fomoir who inhabited the dark mountains to the south, just visible if you stood on top of the chimney - a risky

business for someone who could only cling on with one hand and who couldn't run very fast if Father caught her up there.

Siân was talking about Goibhnie now and, judging by the expectant look on her face, she had just asked a question. Bathsheba looked around wildly, hoping that she wouldn't be called upon to answer it.

To her surprise Gabby the eldest pushed himself to his feet and began to mumble in his usual manner.

'Speak up, Gabriel,' Siân told him, 'so that we can all hear you. It's no good talking to the ground.'

Gabby blushed furiously and lifted his head up to stare fervently at a hayfork, hanging on the wall behind Siân. Now his words tumbled over each other in their eagerness to get out of the constriction of his throat, but at least Bathsheba could hear him. She never tired of hearing Gabby talk about Goibhnie, for Goibhnie was a god and one day she hoped to meet him.

'Please, Siân, I saw Goibhnie when I was very young. He were tall, taller than Father, even taller'n the man who came to tell us that Huw was dead. And he had on a hat so's you couldn't see his face and he come on a big flying rock. He poked something into our sheep because Father said he din't want them to get no sick no more. That was before any of this lot was born so I's the only one that's seen 'im.'

When .he had finished, Siân gave him a warm smile and told him to sit down again, then she turned to look for something in her bag. As she bent down her long black hair tumbled about her shoulders and this set Bathsheba off thinking again.

Bathsheba had always looked with envy upon Siân's hair. Not because it glistened in the sunlight, or because it always smelled so nice. Not because it was black whilst Bathsheba's was a thin mousy colour.

No, the reason for her envy was that Siân had such long flowing lengths. Bathsheba's hair was cut close to the skin and always had been. Nobody had cared to tell her why this was so, but eventually she had been given an answer of sorts by one of the other girls.

'It's in case you're a witch,' she had been told.

A witch! They thought she might be a witch. But how could they? She had never done anything bad, or had she? She had spent long hours thinking about it, but it was only when she had seen Father throw the small foal, with skin over its eyes and misshapen legs, on to the constantly burning fire at the back of the farm, that the reason had come to her.

It was all because of her withered arm. As far as her parents were concerned it was a deformity and for all they knew she could have been born deformed because she had witch's blood in her. Bathsheba

shivered at the thought of the other burning which she had encountered and which had left an even deeper impression on her. On the far side of the farm there was a wood which, out of curiosity, Bathsheba had one day wandered into. As she ventured into the cool green silence a pungent smell assailed her nostrils. She walked further and further and the trees drew closer around her until she had found herself having to force her way through sharp brambles and sweet-smelling bracken. Eventually she had stumbled out into a clearing. The ground, littered with skeletal leaves and fragile branches, was scorched and blackened. Smoke rose where the debris still smouldered - little wonder, for a strong fire had burnt here. In the centre of the clearing there was a thick stone post, engraved deeply with signs and wardings against the power of Arawn. The markings were encrusted with charred remains and a light powdering of ash clung to the surface of the post. Bathsheba moved around the very edge of the clearing until she could see the other side of the post. She grimaced in horror at the sight but a morbid fascination prevented her from looking away. A blackened corpse hung there, suspended by chains clamped tightly around its wrists. What skin there was left was shrivelled, shrunken, but for the most part it had burnt away, leaving crisp muscles and brittle bones exposed to the air. But the horror did not end there, for just as Bathsheba had felt the bile rising to her mouth, the head lifted upwards, white eyes agape, and the mouth fell open as if to scream. But rather than sound it was a torrent of oily black smoke that poured out.

Sitting in the haybarn, Bathsheba's mouth felt dry as she remembered running as fast as she could away from the apparition and finally, when she could run no more, falling to the ground and fainting in a pool of her own sick. She had woken on her bed in the farmhouse with concerned faces looking down at her but afterwards no one mentioned the incident. She had begun to wonder if it had all been a bad dream, but had ventured into the wood again and had found the stone post. No horror hung there, but the circle of sickly looking grass which surrounded it was more than enough to convince her of the truth of what she had seen. And she knew that the stone post was the fate which awaited her if there was any indication that she too might be a witch.

That was the reason why her hair was regularly shorn by her loving mother - so that at the first sign of a darkening of the skin midway between the nape of her neck and the lobe of her ear, she could be burnt without hesitation before she could cause any harm. Her family were watching for the mark of the witch.

She gave another wistful look at the small patch of blue sky just visible through the circular window above the barn door and then

tried to concentrate on the lesson. She slipped easily into daydreaming again and before she knew it the lesson was over and she was following the others out of the barn. By the time she had emerged from its shadow the yard was empty and she stumbled across the cobbles towards the delightful smell of freshly baked bread. She could hear her brothers' and sisters' cries of pleasure as they snatched up the hot bread from their plates and juggled it from hand to hand until it cooled enough for it to be eaten. She pushed open the door and was greeted by a breath of warm air, then she entered the dimly lit humidity of the kitchen. The family sat around the table waiting for her -

there were two empty places at the table, one for her and the other set with an ample helping just in case Dagda or maybe Silvanus should arrive at the doorstep.

Bathsheba settled down on to her stool and waited whilst Mother burnt the first loaf from the oven before she, and all the others, began eating their own meals. A chunk of bread, a wedge of cheese, a ripe purple beetroot and, as a treat, a piece of salted fish made up the meal and it was consumed all too quickly. Bathsheba pushed her plate down along the table and then rose and went out into the yard. One of the cows was gazing soulfully at her over the wall and so she went and rubbed its face. The other children kicked a broken tin cup around the yard and laughed at her when it landed at her feet and she tried to kick it back. She turned away from them and saw Druffud the troll watching her from the shadows of the cowshed. She waved at him and grinned as he tried to manoeuvre his heavy features into a smile.

And then Siân was standing in the door to the barn calling for them to come and settle down again.

Bathsheba leant against the wall where the sun had just been falling and felt its warmth seep into her back. Siân’s voice droned on and on and then...

...she felt the wind rushing over her skin as she pounded across the grassy plain. Her large lungs drew in the air, sweeping it over the sensitive mucous membranes of her nostrils which responded by sending messages to her brain and painting a picture of smells so vivid that she could almost see it superimposed on her vision.

Her feet drummed a rhythm out upon the ground. Her left foot hit, then her right foot. She lifted her left foot, and then another left foot went down. Another left foot! Yes, for she now realized that she had four feet. Her right foot rose and then her two hind feet were on the ground together. Up came her left hind, then momentarily she was flying! Then the tattoo against the soil was repeated, and again, and

again. She let out a whinny of joy at the strength that she felt and flicked her ears back and forth. A low ditch appeared in the distance, approached rapidly and she leapt. The moment lasted forever and then she was on the ground again.

Now shapes impinged on the edge of her sight and she realized that she wasn't galloping alone. To either side of her were grey shapes whose legs moved in perfect harmony with hers. And in front and to the left she saw a marvellous stallion and her heart filled with love. It was a large creature with sleek black lines. Sunlight glistened in an iridescent sheen on hair which rippled as it followed the contractions and relaxations of wonderfully strong muscles. His tail streaked out behind him, swirling in his slipstream. His appearance was heightened by a hazy aura of smell which excited her unaccountably.

She wanted to impress this one and so she tried to put on an extra turn of speed. Pushing her warm muscles to overcome their limits she inched closer to him and veered to her left so that she was closer behind him. His smell grew stronger, inciting her to greater efforts. But she couldn't overtake him and so she resumed her original position and merely let the feeling of her vitality course through her and then . . .

... she was back in the haybarn, trying to catch the thread of what Siân had been saying. A trickle of a tear twisted sinuously down her dusty cheek at the thought of the power she had just felt. Her body with its weak muscles was nothing compared to that.

'Luckily for us Goibhnie was able to trap all the demons he had made under his island and so all the evil that they had within them has stayed there.' Siân gave a stem look to the children and paused, an indication to the children that they were about to be told the moral for the day. Even if they hadn't paid any attention during those hours they should at least remember this message. 'But that doesn't mean that we can become complacent, for once in a while a demon may escape and come among us and cause all sorts of mischief. The way to recognize such a creature is by a mark on the back of the neck and the remedy is burning.'

Bathsheba hadn't heard half of this because she had been wondering what 'complacent' was, but she heard the last word and she rubbed the soft, downy hair on the back of her head and shivered.

'All right, children,' Siân said, 'that's enough lessons for today. You can go out and play in what's left of the afternoon.'

With one accord, the children were up and through the barn door, all except for Bathsheba who followed them slowly. She wandered out of the farm and climbed laboriously up the hill which overlooked it. The farmhouse itself was the tallest building, by virtue of the chimney

which rose high so that its smoke was carried far away from the haybarn which squatted at its side. Opposite the house was the L-shaped cowshed, behind which was the large, low grain store. The buildings were surrounded by small fields, their boundaries marked by well-built rough stone walls. Leading away from the farmhouse was a narrow lane which vanished into nothing once it got beyond the central core of fields.

She settled down on a comfortable hummock of grass, lay on her back and gazed up into the sky, her eyes half shut. Above her head was the blinding glare of the sun, but just visible in the direction of her feet was the pale red globe of the other sun which was at its most obvious at night-time; Father had told her that the day-sun was drawn behind Dagda s war chariot and the night-sun which when it was in the night sky lent a red twilight cast to the landscape, was drawn behind Arawn's chariot.

She rolled over and pressed her face into the cool grass. First she tried to block out all the sunlight by wrapping her arms around her head. When she had done that she looked closely lit the grass, trying to see if there were any insects crawling there. After some time a small beetle made its way between the forest of blades and she caught it on her good hand. She held it up in the sunlight and watched in scurry along her arm, then she dropped it back on to the soil.

She looked down at the farm and saw that Paul was waving to her to come for supper. She pushed herself to her feet and began to make her way back down the hill.

In the kitchen an extra place had been laid for Siân who was given the privilege of holding a spoon of the broth over the fire until it sizzled away. After the meal the table was pushed to one side and the family gathered around the fireplace.

'How have the children been, my dear?' Father asked Siân.

'Oh, they have been as children always are when I come to teach them things. A lot of daydreaming, wandering minds and bored faces.'

Father laughed. 'I was probably the same with your grandmother. '

'Yes, you were,' Mother told him.

There was a long silence, finally broken by Siân. 'I see you have some books. May I look at them?'

'I'll get them,' shouted Priss and ran over to the shelf. She jumped up and down trying to reach them until Gabby went and laughingly lifted her so that she could gather them up into her arms. She carried them over and dropped them into Siân’s lap. She picked them up one by one and flicked through them.

Then she looked up disappointed.

'It's all strange words,' she said, 'no pictures.'

'I could read something from them if you like,' suggested Father.

'Would you?' Siân asked gratefully.

Aquila shouted out, 'Let Basheba! Let Basheba!'

Siân raised an eyebrow at this. 'Bathsheba can read this?'

'My grandfather taught me how to read it,' Father told her, 'and I taught Bathsheba. It's been passed down ever since we came to Tír na n-Óg.'

He picked up one of the books and opened it. 'This is the most interesting one. It contains stories about the other world.' He leafed through it as though he was looking for something, then he handed the book to Bathsheba. 'Here you are, read this.'

Bathsheba looked at the story that Father had chosen for her to read and her face fell slightly, for it was about a man who had been possessed by demons. She began to read, stumblingly at first, but then with increasing confidence. It quickly dealt with how the main character drove the demons out but then went on to a long wordy bit.

'The um, the council of elders said, "It is only by Beelzebub" - he's a demon - "that this fellow drives out demons." But he knew their thoughts and said back to them, "Every kingdom divided against itself will be ruined and every city divided against itself will not stand." ‘

Bathsheba carried on reading the tale, which on the whole was a rather dull affair, while Siân listened intently. When it was finished Siân was silent for a short time.

'Is it a book of wisdom in the other world?' she finally asked.

'I usually just read the exciting bits in the first half,' Bathsheba told her. Actually she liked it most because it was a book about the other place and she liked to imagine what it was like.

‘I don't know really,' said Father. 'My grandfather told me that his grandmother considered it a very important book. There's a lot of stuff about their god so maybe it's a religious book. '

Suddenly this discussion was interrupted by Priss shouting, 'Daddy, can I show Siân my whistle?' and then all the children were asking to show Siân something they had made or could do.

After a short time Father glanced out of the window and saw that it was dark outside.

'Right, everyone,' he said, 'it's time to get to bed. Siân, I've made you a place to sleep by the children's bedroom, if that's all right?'

'Oh yes, that'll be fine, thank you.'

All of the family made their way to their beds. Bathsheba heard her father going round and wishing all the other children a good night's sleep. As usual he did not come to her. He never had since David had died. Before then he had loved her very much and had taken the time to teach her to do things with her mind to make up for her own weakness. But when David was killed he had behaved as

though it had been her fault and he had never been so close to her again.

Before long the house was filled with the silence characteristic of sleeping people. Bathsheba pulled her rough woollen blanket up over her head and drifted into a dream-filled sleep.

She was walking along the lane that led up to the farm, between two rough stone walls that towered above her. David held her hand tightly so that she wouldn't stumble and as he walked he told her jokes and made her laugh. Suddenly his expression changed and he turned round. Helpless in his grip she was swept around with him and bearing down on them she saw the herd of cows. She remembered that they were being chased by a wild wolf. David began to drag her down the lane but soon realized that he could not outrun them and so he turned to the wall, picked her up and threw her over it. As she sailed slowly through the air she looked back and saw David starting to climb over the wall. One of the cows barrelled into him and he was knocked to the ground. She could hear his cries as the cows' feet struck down at him and then all she could hear was the thunder of hooves in the lane. And then . . .

. . . she woke and heard hoofbeats outside the farm. She crept out from her bed and, treading carefully so as not to disturb the others, she went to the kitchen door and looked out into the yard. She gave a gasp of joy at the three Ceffyl standing there. One was a stallion, its body a pool of darkness. It stood tall and proud above the two silvery-grey mares.

A hand fell upon her shoulder.

‘What are you doing out here, Bathsheba?' Father asked her.

‘It’s Rush and her stallion,' she told him. 'Can I talk to her?'

‘All right, and I'll see what the stallion wants.'

She walked out into the yard and the smaller of the two mares walked slowly towards her. The mare dipped its head down to Bathsheba so that she could run her fingers along the narrow shaft of horn that protruded from the hair of its forelock. Immediately a voice sounded inside her head

'Hello, Bats, I trust you are well. '

'Hello, Rush, I haven't seen you for a long time,' Bathsheba answered. She was dimly aware of Father leading the other mare into the barn. 'Why have you come here?'

'Do I have to have a reason to come to see you?'

'No, but I thought ... '

'You wonder why my stallion brought Swift to your father?'

Bathsheba nodded.

'Swift is overdue. She needs some help bringing her foal into the world

before it grows too big for her. ' Rush snickered softly and threw her head back a couple of times. *'I accompanied them so that I could see you and because I am running with my stallion.'* Rush dropped her head closer to Bathsheba's in a movement that in a. human would have indicated confidentiality. *I have not told him yet but I missed my last cycle. '*

Suddenly Bathsheba heard another voice impinging on Rush's words. She looked around to find its source but the voice was quiet and unclear.

'What's that?' she asked.

'My foal,' Rush answered. *'Her thoughts are muddled but she is letting me know that she is all right. I shall name her Bat, after you. '*

Bathsheba smiled at this compliment and hugged Rush's nose.

'Would you like a run on my back?' Rush asked.

Bathsheba eagerly nodded her head and moved round to Rush's side. She reached up to the mane hanging down to the left of the mare's neck and twisted a handful of it around her wrist. Rush strained round her head and boosted Bathsheba up on to her back. She weakly took a few pieces of hair from the withers in her right hand and gripped Rush's flanks with her knees as best she could.

She needn't have worried, for when Rush started to move it was with an easy gait, and besides she knew that Rush would not allow her to fall. As she got used to the motion she began to enjoy the feel of the cool night air plucking at her night garments and rushing swiftly across her face. It rapidly removed the last vestiges of sleep from her eyes and she looked around her alertly.

Watching the landscape speeding by she started to notice, not with her eyes but more with an intuitive sense, that it was going past faster than the horse itself was galloping. She leaned close into the curve of Rush's neck and asked, 'Why is the ground moving faster than we are?'

'It's all a question of time, my little Bats,' Rush replied. *'You humans are so intent on your one little moment of present time, while we are, in a way, smudged in time.'*

'I ... I don't understand.'

'It's very hard to explain to someone who doesn't experience it. Now, hold on, we're going up this hill.'

Bathsheba clung tightly as Rush surged up the hill and so she was safe when the mare abruptly halted.·

'Look over there. What do you see?' Rush raised her foreleg and indicated with that and a toss of her head that Bathsheba should look to the west where the dim red orb was rising into the night sky.

Bathsheba chewed the end of her finger and gazed intently to the west. 'Nothing, really. Farms, I suppose. The Sidhe settlements are to the west. But it's far too dark to see anything.'

Rush whinnied impatiently and stamped her hoof on the ground. *'So what can you actually see?'*

Realization dawned on Bathsheba. 'You mean Arawn's Wheel!' she exclaimed.

'Exactly!' Rush's voice echoed resoundingly inside Bathsheba's head and a loud background noise bubbled up to the surface of her mind. Bathsheba waited while Rush quietened down the foal still within her womb.

'So what about it?' she asked eventually.

'I told you we were not as you humans, how we are not entirely fixed to the present. ' She paused.

'Yes?' prompted Bathsheba.

'The red sun, Arawn's Wheel as you call it, features very heavily in our futures, in all our futures.

There are bad times coming to Tír na n-Óg. '

'Bad times?' Bathsheba asked worriedly.

'The worst!' Rush affirmed ominously.

Bathsheba was silent. She didn't know what she could say to this revelation of what was coming.

Suddenly Rush gave a high-pitched whinny.

'Hold tight!' she shouted and set off at a gallop down the hillside. ' *Time to return. It's all over at the farm and my stallion will be waiting. '*

They sped across the darkened countryside and at last arrived back. Waiting in the yard were Father, the stallion, the mare and a small perfectly formed foal which wobbled unsteadily on its spindly legs. Its hair and skin were pure white but for the witch mark that all of the intelligent creatures of Tír na n-Óg -

except the humans - bore. In the centre of its forehead was a small button that would eventually become its horn.

Father lifted Bathsheba down off Rush's back and they stood and watched the four Ceffyl trot unhurriedly down the lane. Just when they had almost vanished into the blackness, Bathsheba heard a faint voice in her head.

'Goodbye, Bats, and remember what I told you.'

Already Bathsheba felt sleep returning to her and she let Father guide her back to her bed. Just this once he gave her a light kiss on the forehead and then was gone. As she fell into the grip of sleep she heard Rush's words returning to her.

'There are bad times coming to Tír na n-Óg, the worst! Remember, Bats, remember!'

Central Park, New York, a' place of escape for workers of the city, a haven for the overstressed and overpaid, a patch of greenery amidst the urban jungle away from the bulls and the bears and the

headhunters. Even at the centre of the teeming metropolis it is possible for sunlight to fall; a plant may grow, an egg may split open, a grub may feed on the plant, form a chrysalis. And then ...

Pushing its way out of the shell, its wings hardening rapidly, a butterfly emerges. The sunlight which started the cycle dances playfully on the iridescent scales which interlock to form the wings. There is an experimental movement and the butterfly takes to the air, wings applauding its own amazing feat.

The wings move air molecules, set up vibrations which spread around the globe until days, weeks, even months later, rain clouds gather over a distant country and a light drizzle begins to fall. Effect follows cause as inevitably as night follows day. Or does day follow night?

Or what if there is only night?

Everything is connected. Subtle links exist between everywhere and everywhen. Singularity unifies them. At singularity, everything is one - it is the quiet at the centre of a tornado, the Eye of Harmony.

On a planet far away from the tranquil pleasures of Central Park, a planet called Gallifrey whose history is tied up with the Earth's far more than its inhabitants appreciate, there dwell a people whose upper echelons are self-styled Lords of Time. These Time Lords, when important affairs of state require a display of pomp and ceremony, come together in a place called the Panopticon Hall. It is a place with great significance to them, for beneath it, entwined in bonds forged by the legendary first Time Lord, Rassilon, is the black hole which in Gallifreyan folklore has become known as the Eye of Harmony.

From this rich source springs forth the raw artron energy which powers every TARDIS from the simplest Time Scaphe (or at least those which did not rely, gods forbid, on the telepathic powers of their occupants) to the more recent and more sophisticated models which could travel beyond the accepted boundaries of this universe into the eternal nothingness and return. Even a battered Type 40 draws its vitality from this wellspring - if it can. But links are essential and the Doctor's TARDIS was losing its link.

Time and space are linked. They intersect at an angle determined by some alien, non-Euclidean geometry, and the place where they meet is the space-time vortex. Like a poorly enlarged photograph, the vortex is grainy, particulate. Sometimes the particles clump together at a nexus point.

The TARDIS hung in the vortex, straining to maintain her position against the streaming delta flows.

Like Scylla clinging to her rocky home against the demon pull of Charybdis, the TARDIS embraced a nexus point with tenuous mathematical equations. At any time the hold could snap and the

would be swept uncontrollably along. In her present state of disrepair, this could prove fatal for her occupants.

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Unaware of her imminent danger, Ace sighed heavily and marvelled at the illusion of openness created in this section of the time machine. It was as though there really was sky stretching away above her. The sound of birdsong drifted along the cloistered walkways and echoed between the pillars. There was the smell that damp earth gave off immediately after a rainstorm and the air was pure and clean. A twisted sapling cast a shadow across her brown eyes as she lay on the low stone bench looking upwards.

Under other circumstances she would have found the TARDIS's cloister room relaxing, but now it just fuelled her increasing frustration with its all invasive tranquillity. The Doctor had been at work for some time now repairing the TARDIS's damaged systems - every time she had ventured into the control room where the hexagonal console resided she had found him with his head concealed by a mass of wiring. She had given up trying to talk to him and had sought other entertainment in the myriad rooms of the TARDIS. Some hadn't been opened for centuries, their contents long resigned to suffocation under a thick layer of dust, and Ace wasn't the type to start spring-cleaning. She went on through the rooms until she found a workshop which had been occupied quite recently; she toyed idly with various tools, created a minor explosion, and left. Now she was seriously bored and wanted to do something.

Above her a bell started tolling. She tried to ignore it, but it went on and on, reverberating back and forth in her skull. When she could stand it no more she stood and strode along between the ivy-shrouded columns.

Looking down at the floor she saw footprints. This area was sheltered from above and something had come in from the ersatz ruin and wandered towards the exit. The tiny marks were a cat's pawprints.

Ahead of her Ace caught a glimpse of something moving. Casting a second glance at the floor, she stepped towards the movement and headed for the console room.

The tolling of the bell stopped, but it had already been banished from her mind.

She found the Doctor slumped in his wicker armchair. Maybe it was just her current preoccupation, or had the barely mumbled word before she entered been 'Lynx'?

'What's that?' she asked. She looked closely, examined him. The Time Lord looked drained, almost old. It was as though the trials that

the TARDIS had been through were taking their toll on him. He was over seven hundred years old and at the moment looked like he was bearing every moment of those years upon his shoulders. This was not to be expected, for the Doctor belonged to a race who had the ability to regenerate their physical bodies when they became too damaged. And besides, he had a stronger constitution than many small countries.

'What's up, Doc?' she asked, trying to inject some cheer into her voice. She squatted down in front of him and looked up at his lined face and deep, dark eyes.

'Oh, nothing.' He ruffled her hair and managed to smile, but the lines in his forehead remained in place. 'Universal ennui, perhaps.'

'Professor, I saw the cat again.'

The cat. When the TARDIS had sustained its present damage, inflicted upon it by a mysterious alien Process, it had manifested itself in the disturbed dimensional turmoil as a silver cat. Whilst the TARDIS

had hung in limbo, Ace had seen the cat, in brief glimpses, wandering the corridors. It seemed, she thought, to be growing bolder, as if it was moving towards making contact. She wondered how its silver fur would feel, rubbing and rippling against her legs.

'I heard the cloister bell ringing,' the Doctor told her.

Ace stood and went round to the other side of the console. She toyed with a switch. 'I've just come from there,' she said.

'And. now you're here: ' The Doctor nodded as if confirming something in his own mind. 'And the cloister bell has stopped ringing.'

'Where?' he asked suddenly.

Ace's distracted fumbling was interrupted.. 'Where what?'

'Where did you see the cat?' the Doctor asked.

'In the cloister room.'

'A call to man the battle stations,' the Doctor murmured to himself. 'I think the time for action has come, Ace. I have reached an impasse in repairing the TARDIS. There is nothing more I can do.'

'Why not?'

'Spare parts are required.'

'For what?'

The Doctor rose from his chair and looked around confusedly. 'Block transfer computation,' he told her as if this made the point clear. He wasn't prepared to tell her of the damage to the link with the Eye of Harmony. Links were important to the Doctor. He had connections - some more fundamental than others. The thought that the energy of the TARDIS might be lost completely worried the Doctor intensely. He could no more reveal his fear than a warlock could

reveal his true name. That knowledge could give others a power over him - if they knew how to use it. He couldn't risk anyone having that power. Once before he had done so - never again.

He looked under the chair.

'Professor! What's block transfer computation?'

'The method by which the outer plasmic hull of the TARDIS, the interior configuration and a host of other details are derived. Have you noticed any signs of the disfunction? Slight deficiencies in the corridor subroutines? The fractal constructions? Block transfer mathematics, you see, was discovered by the Logopolitans. They were on the verge of a breakthrough, setting up entropy-reducing programs to run on computers, when the Master turned his attention to them. No one else has their mathematical skill and so TARDISes require morphologically unstable living organic matter for their block transfer function.'

'Morpho ... ?'

'Hmmm. ' The Doctor furrowed his brow and ran his fingers through his dark-brown hair. 'The calculations change reality and ordinarily computers wouldn't be able to withstand that sort of stress without losing their own ability to function. Organic matter *is* adaptable, but the TARDIS's is somewhat atrophied.

'So where can we get some more?'

'I haven't the faintest idea. Gallifrey, perhaps Axos, even Nestene matter might work.' He paused and scratched his head. 'Ace where did I put my hat?'

Ace turned and pulled open the semicircular doors of a cupboard set into one of the wall roundels.

Something like quicksilver darted past her shoulder and landed lightly on the sloping console.

Ace spun round in time to see the mercurial silver cat leap deftly amongst the controls and then plunge head first into the monitor screen where it left a burning afterimage which remained some time after the rest of it had gone..

The central time column began to rise and fall, Its interior rotor easing slowly into motion.

Suddenly the floor heaved and Ace was flung against the wall. Vibrations rocked the TARDIS and its dimensions twisted.

Its mathematical anchors pulling free of the nexus point, the TARDIS threw an algebraic lifeline into the vortex. It looped wildly and then caught. As the equations hardened into reality, the real world interface was inserted into a new locale.

A light drizzle began to speckle the TARDIS’s outer plasmic hull.

1:

Arrivals

The sudden transition into darkness momentarily blind Cheiron, but knowing what followed close behind he couldn't afford the few seconds it would take to acclimatize.

Earth flew as he kicked his feet and took off into the surrounding gloom, dodging vaguely seen trees and desperately hoping that he would not lose his footing on the uneven ground, lumpy with protruding stones. At his rear, he heard shouts begin midword and he doubled his pace, arms thrust out to ward off low branches. An arrow streaked past him and for a brief moment he began to doubt the wisdom of his actions since he had seen the break in the wall.

Sudden pain seared his flank and his legs, out of control for a heartbeat, flung him into the embrace of a welcoming birch tree. He pushed himself away from it and resought his direction. It was given to him by the cries of his pursuers and gathering speed again he groped at the arrow in his side. The shaft snapped, leaving the arrowhead still within him. He flung the wand of oak away from him and lengthened his stride, striking up a new rhythm on the soft earth.

This was not at all what he had expected. Being what he was he knew that there were dangers involved, that he could not be sure of a warm welcome, but this place seemed no different to that which he had left. He had heard that it was practically overflowing with people, but where were they? The only people were those firing arrows at him.

At last his eyes were growing used to the darkness, or was it that the trees were thinning and letting in some light? Now he could see that he was as before in a valley and so he aimed to escape up its sides.

Around him the trees definitely were thinning out and a pale, watery light gave the grass, damp with rain, a silvery sheen. The ground was rising before him; small outcroppings of rock broke through the sparsely vegetated hillside, silent sentinels to his increasingly weary labourings.

A deafening crack assailed his ears, sending echoes up and down the valley, and heat tore down his arm, followed by a ready stream of blood. He gave a wild howl to release some of the pain and drove upwards.

Finally he crested the hill and found himself on a small flat ridge. He turned and gave a brief look down into the valley. Not far from the edge of the trees, a small band of men was labouring up the gradient. He drew back hurriedly and positioned himself on the far side of the

ridge, out of sight of his pursuers. But as he did this, he looked into the sky and saw the white orb floating there. It wasn't like either of the suns, because it had features upon it, and it was a discomfiting reminder that he was in a new world. Tearing his fascinated gaze away from the mysterious globe he thanked Dagda that it gave out such a small amount of light. He hoped that they would be unable to track him by it as he set off at a brisk trot along the ridge.

Clouds scurried across the sky, their outlines lined in white, and brought with them brief squalls of rain. Despite his injuries his footing was secure and he moved quickly along the increasingly narrow strip of level ground.

But he was wearying and after he had covered about five hundred ells he left the ridge and descended into the next valley. Something tore into his front and gouged the flesh on his legs. He tripped and rolled but regained his feet immediately and continued running. Casting a glance up to the top of the slope he saw that there was no one in pursuit.

That moment of retrospection was his downfall. The ground suddenly vanished from beneath his feet and he fell, flailing his legs, searching for some purchase. There was a snap as he impacted on the ground and he collapsed, panting.

He struggled up, but his leg gave beneath him. He already knew that it was broken but he reached back and probed at the offending limb with his fingertips; they came away bloody and he had felt spicules of bone sticking through the skin. Now he felt a chill touch on his flesh and he realized that he had fallen into a gully cut into the hillside by the stream which ran at its bottom. He was partially hidden from above, but not enough so he groped into the shadows for something which would give him a handhold into their concealment. There was nothing.

A light drizzle had started and the white not-sun was obscured by clouds, but this only aided the water in leeching the warmth from his body. He gave a kick with his good legs, pitching himself into the dark of the overhang, and then as if to help his hiding, the heavens opened, sending down impenetrable sheets of rain. He began to feel almost safe from the eyes his pursuers. But though they might not kill him, he could not be sure that the cold would not do the job as effectively. He felt weak and dizzy as his blood seeped and mixed with the stream water. Slowly a total darkness descended on his mind...

Inspector Anderson brought his car to a halt, took his hat off the passenger seat and slipped out into the drizzle. He tugged the hat firmly into place and buttoned his jacket up tight against the rain.

Red light washed the scene of destruction before him. The coach had gone straight through the central barrier, careered across the

northbound lane and then plunged down the banking, coming to rest on its side in the midst of the luridly lit field of oilseed rape. The last of the ambulances was pulling away as he walked along the hard shoulder to examine the wreckage.

The coach didn't have the name of a firm emblazoned along its side as most did - it probably didn't belong to a line of coaches. It was an infrequent sight, an anonymous coach, but it wasn't entirely unusual.

Anderson stood at the top of the banking for a couple of seconds before he decided to tackle its treacherously muddy slope. He slithered down it, one hand behind him to ward off a potentially embarrassing slide. One of the constables strolled towards him, his fluorescent yellow jacket merging with the flowerheads behind him.

'Morning,. sir,' the man said and Anderson momentarily glanced at his watch. It really was morning -

just gone one o'clock in fact. We thought we'd better call you out sir because of this accident.'

'It's all right, constable, erm,' Anderson peered at the man's badge 'Constable Parker.' Anderson didn't really mind being called away from his lovely warm sofa; at least it got him away from her. 'What's the difficulty?'

Well, sir, if you'd just come over here ... ' Parker led him round the side, rather the bottom, of the bus to where a number of rather squashed-looking suitcases were piled on the bent, wet stalks. 'There are more of these inside.'

'The passengers' luggage, surely?'

'Yes, but ... ' Parker opened one of the cases and motioned for Anderson to look inside.

'Good lord, how much?'

'Fifty thousand in that one, sir. And all the others are the same. Maybe not the same amount, but stuffed full of money.' He closed the case and pressed the locks shut.

'And how many cases are there?'

'Same as there are passengers, forty-two.'

Anderson rubbed his chin. 'Well, are we dealing with a coachload of armed bank robbers going on holiday, or what? An eccentric millionaires' outing?'

'It's hard to say, sir. Only the driver had any identification. A Mr Selwyn Hughes from Llanfer Ceiriog, according to his driving licence. He's no longer with us, I'm afraid, sir.'

'The passengers have all been taken to Condicote Hospital, have they?'

'That's right, sir. But I wouldn't be too hopeful, there'll have been a lot DOA.'

'I'd better get over there, anyway. Oh, and I'll expect an inventory of those cases when I get back to the station,' Anderson said as he turned and began to trudge his way through the sodden vegetation. He managed to slip on his way back up the banking.

***

The casualty department at Condicote had gone to full alert at the first news of the crash on the motorway, but gradually it had become apparent that the coach was the only vehicle involved in the incident and, further, that most of the passengers on the coach were beyond the help of even the best doctors. There was still work to be done, but nothing on the scale that was originally expected. A queue of bodies, their contours muffled by thin, white sheets, lay waiting for transport to a more suitable resting place. One by one, a police sergeant pulled the sheets and examined the bodies for identifying features. He scribbled brief descriptions on to a clipboard which he balanced on his subjects' chests while he looked at them. He turned at the sound of footfalls behind him.

'Hello, Sergeant Yardley,' Inspector Anderson greeted the stocky Yorkshireman cordially. The dark eyes gazed back him from beneath caterpillar eyebrows. 'Evenin', 'spector, sir,' Yardley returned. He leant the clipboard against a young lady's head and slipped his biro into his top pocket.

'The living aren't in any state to help me just now, so I thought I'd come and see you,' Anderson told him. 'Are you making any progress?'

'There's a couple of things, sir. I don't know if they're of any particular significance.' Anderson grinned inwardly at the way Yardley pronounced each syllable of the word 'particular' separately.

'Oh, yes, what are they?' he asked.

'Well, firstly, they're all wearing very similar clothes, every thing's been 'ad from Marks and Sparks.'

'No room in their suitcases' for any other clothes,' said Anderson to himself.

'What's that, sir?'

Anderson waved a hand dismissively. 'Nothing, nothing. Go on.'

'The other thing about the clothes is that they all appear to be brand spanking new. Look.' He pulled at the sweater the young girl was wearing so that the back was visible. Pushed through the nylon was a thin strand of plastic with a thickened end. It was threaded through a hole in a small scrap of card.

'A price tag.'

'Exactly, sir. And this isn't the only one that still has price tags in her clothes. Like I said, it's as though they all bought new clothes for this trip.'

'Well, that's not so unusual. People often buy something new for

their holidays. '

'Aye,' shrugged Yardley, 'but this stuffs so plain. Not what you'd choose at all.'

'Hmmm. What else?'

'The other thing I noticed, sir, is this.' He slipped the sheet back over the girl's head after he had removed his clipboard, then he walked along the row of corpses until he found what he' was looking for.

He revealed the pallid face of an old man, his wrinkled head covered by straggly white hair. He pulled back a portion of this matted and knotty mess to show something more clearly to Anderson. A dark, discoloured patch of skin was uncovered on the old man's neck. It was regularly shaped and split into three distinct sections, joined by jagged brown lines. At one point of this triangle was a half-moon shape, at the highest point rested a hexagon, and the other point was made tip by a circular mark.

'That's one hell of a birthmark,' the Inspector commented.

'That's not all ' Yardley told him. He moved quickly to the next body and demonstrated that it too had a similar mark. 'Once I noticed it on two of them I went back and checked them all. There's five of them just like that, the mark always in the same place just behind the ear on the neck.'

'What do you think? Is it a tattoo? A brand?'

'Couldn't rightly say, sir. Maybe they're all members of some religious sect. It's bloody strange, whatever it is.

Anderson thought back over it. The suitcases full of money, the brand new clothes, and now these marks. It certainly was strange, bloody strange.

Old Davy looked on with an air of cultivated indifference as the impossible happened before him. He had the sort of face that Canute probably had, and had it belonged to Pharaoh: he would have ignored the parting of the Red Sea, charged right through and killed Moses on the spot. Fortunately for the Israelites, it wasn't Pharaoh's face, it was Old Davy's. He managed this fine control of his facial muscles by a technique that he had picked up from fifty years of watching his cows performing the same trick.

No matter what the conditions, those cows had stood in their field, or in the milking parlour, or at the market, even for several seconds after they were dead, .and they had steadfastly refused to be surprised by any of the things which had happened to them. And, of course, there are a great many things more bizarre than a blue police box materializing out of nowhere.

Its coming was heralded by a raucous sound that echoed back and forth across the valley, at the bottom of which nestled very few houses

which made up the village of Llanfer Ceiriog. Davy watched the flashing white light atop the police box from his bench outside the Black Swan. The pub had received the name when it was renovated by its English owner, and it was probably because of this that most of the locals avoided it preferring to go to Gwydyr down the road. Davy, being unconcerned with nationalism in any of its forms, kept a solitary vigil outside the Black Swan day and night. If any of his friends passed by he wished them a good morning, perhaps made comment on the weather and then returned to his pint.

After several minutes of carefully judged pint-gazing, Old Davy looked up and shouted across the triangular patch of grass to where the police box had appeared next to the post office-cum-village shop.

Two figures were emerging from within. One was a shortish man with brown hair, wearing a brown jacket and dark tartan trousers. The other, whom he didn't recognize, was a girl, perhaps twenty, in black cycling shorts and an oversized T-shirt. She carried a large rucksack over one shoulder.

'Bore da, Doctor!' Davy shouted. The Doctor turned and waved, then, obviously noticing the light drizzle, he disappeared into the interior and emerged seconds later carrying an umbrella. Davy had often wondered if perhaps he should invest in such an article, but decided on reflection that a little extra water didn't make that much difference to the pub's beer. As they walked over to him, he listened to their conversation.

'It's not exactly New York is it, Professor?'

'Hmmm,' the Doctor agreed. 'None of the old Detroit perfume. I'm rather glad this is where we've ended up. Are you sure you've got everything you need, Ace? I've decided to give the TARDIS a rest -

maybe she'll regenerate some of her damaged components. I don't want you coming back every half hour disturbing the repair systems.'

'Everything's cool, Professor.' She shook her rucksack so that metallic clankings emanated from it.

'Pitons, ropes, harness, everything.' She looked at the umbrella in the Doctor's hand. ‘Is that all you're bringing?' she asked.

‘You know I always travel light. And besides, I have all the equipment I need right here,' he told her, waggling his free fingers under her nose. By now they had reached Davy. The Doctor gave him a wide grin.

‘Bore da to you too, Old Davy! This is my friend, Ace.'

'The squeaky one had enough of you; is it?' Davy chuckled. ‘And a little less of the old, if you don’t mind. I’ve an inkling you've seen a few more nights than I have, well preserved though you are.'

'Um Professor?' Ace said. 'I'm just going to get something from the post office.' She dropped the rucksack at the Doctor's feet and ran off

back the way she had come.

‘Been quite a time since you were here, Doctor,' the old man said.

The Doctor took a watch from his jacket pocket and flicked it open. 'Seven years as the chronometer flies,' he said. 'Any changes around here?'

'Not so you'd notice. Still the same old place, isn’t it. I suppose you'll be staying up at Hugh's.’

'Hmmm, I did leave a note for him. Somewhere in the nineteenth century, I think it was,' the Doctor mused.

'Well he's retired. Just keeps a few of those Swaledales now. The old 'Welsh Mountain breed's not good enough for him, eh?'

'Yes, quite probably. Well, it's good to see you again. I'm going to be around for a few more days.

Ace wanted to do a bit of rock-climbing and the old TARDIS and the old Time Lord need a bit of a break too.' He picked up Ace's rucksack and trailed off to the post office.

Davy picked up his pint and took a suck at it: He blew between his teeth and glanced at the Doctor s retreating back. He was an odd one all right, but no worse than your average tourist.

Stuart Taylor blinked as the sun was broken up into a glimmering mass across his windscreen. The next second, the road dipped back down again and he could see where he was going.

He had been on a farm with a cow that was down with milk fever. As he'd walked up to the animal, flies had swarmed about its head and he had wondered if he was too late. But there been a fluttering heartbeat and so he raised a vein, inserted a needle and gave the animal two bottles of calcium borogluconate.

Milk fever was common at this time of year, with calvings going on, and could quite easily be fatal.

But the treatment was so simple that the cure seemed miraculous when the cow staggered to its feet a few minutes after the administration the calcium.

As he had stood back and watched the cow lurch up the bleeper at his waist had sounded and he had asked to use the farm s phone. Liz, the receptionist back at his surgery, had told him that there was a foaling that required his attention over Llanfer Ceiriog. He had got into his car and set off straight away, declining the offer of coffee.

As. he drove through Llanfer he vaguely noticed the new addition to the scenery and he wondered whether the place really needed a police telephone box. Just through the village was narrow gravel track which led off the main road up to the stables

He pulled to a stop in front of the house, hoisted his water proof trousers up around his waist and got out of the car. Rooting around in

the boot, he found his ropes and a bottle of lubricating gel and then turned and shouted to anyone who could hear him, 'Hello!'

He wandered round the side of the house into the yard. Heads appeared over stable doors and ears turned in his direction. He stood in the centre of the concrete yard and shouted again 'Hello!'

Nobody appeared and so he strolled round the boxes, looking into them. The horse he was looking for was obvious. It lay amongst its straw bedding and strained. There was no mistaking it.

At the sight of him, and despite its distress, it raised its head to watch him. It was a bay, brown with black points, and a bright white star and stripe covered the front of its face. But above the star, amongst the hair of its mane which dangled over its forelock, was a gaping hole, filled with a thick dark brown mass.

It looked as though someone had smashed a hole in the horse's head, Stuart thought. He leaned forward to get a closer look and saw that there were splinters of something still protruding from the wound. A hand fell upon his shoulder.

‘Hello, Mr Taylor. You've found her all right, eh?'

He turned round and found that the girlish voice hardly matched the stocky little Welshwoman in her tweed skirt.

'Yes, Mrs Tremayne. Now then, I'll need a bucket of hot…'

Mrs Tremayne held up a steaming bucket which she was holding in one hand and from the other she dropped a bar of soap, which fell with a plop into the water. 'All ready, Mr Taylor, all ready.' She leaned round him and opened the stable door. 'In you go, I'll be right behind you.'

Stuart stepped out of the light drizzle into the cool stable. He took the bucket from Mrs Tremayne, put it on the floor and dropped the ropes into it. After he had taken the bottle out of his pocket and placed it against the bucket, he took off his jacket and shirt and handed them to her. She hung them over the stable door as, kneeling in the straw, he scrubbed his arms clean. From the bottle he poured a viscous blob of gel into his hand and then, holding the tail up out of the way with the other, he eased it into the horse.

'How did it get that cut on its head?' he asked. He could immediately feel that the foal was presented wrongly and so he withdrew his arm and reached for one of the ropes. He looked up at Mrs Tremayne to see if she had heard.

She pointed up at the stable roof which was made of sheets of corrugated metal whose edges were somewhat the worse for wear. 'Caught it on that, didn't he, she said, indicating a particularly vicious-looking piece.

Stuart slipped his arm back in and tried to get the loop in the rope

over one of the forelimbs. 'You ought to do something about that,' he told her, but all the same, he wasn't convinced that it could have done the damage that he had seen. The first loop went over the soft hoof and he eased it up the leg. Once again, he pulled his arm out and took another rope. 'Can you just give me a bit more ... ?' he asked, tilting his head towards the bottle. She took it and slopped some of the gel on to his hand. 'And could you hold the tail?' he asked. She took it, as he pushed his arm back into the womb and worked for a couple of minutes at putting the rope round the other leg. It eventually went on, and he took out his arm and pulled on the ropes.

He could feel the foal moving and he could imagine it round to face its point of exit. And then, suddenly, two spindly legs were sticking out. The head followed before they were than halfway out and then the perfectly formed foal was lying on the straw in front of him. Quickly he cleaned the slime the foal's nostrils. It was breathing nicely and the mare turned and began to lick at it.

Stuart sat back on the straw, and as he did so his hand rested on something lying concealed there. Not sure why, he took object without looking and slipped it into his pocket. 'Just keep an eye on it and make sure it begins to suckle, Tremayne,' he said. 'I'll just go and get cleaned up.' When he returned the foal was standing waveringly, its umbilical cord broken now, and Mrs Tremayne was beaming at it with pleasure. She thanked him and followed him to his car.

'Are you sure I can't do something about that wound?' he asked.

'No, no,' she said, 'I'm sure it'll be all right.' She stood her gate and as she reached the bottom of the drive, he glanced in his mirror and saw that she was still there.

He was through Llanfer Ceiriog before he remembered the object in his pocket. He pulled over on one side of the road and took it out.

It was about four inches long, tapering to a point at one end. The other end was cracked and splintered as though it had been broken off something. It was an off-grey colour and was of the same material as a horse's hooves. There was no doubt in Stuart's mind. It was a unicorn's horn.

He put it back into his pocket, started the car and set off back to Gwydyr. He passed two people walking up the road, but the barely registered on his sight. A unicorn, who would believe it? He wasn't sure that he did, but there was the horn and the place on the horse's head where it looked as though it had come from. Hardly conclusive, but Stuart could almost see the creature in his mind's eye, pounding across the mountains of Wales. But there was something else tugging at his thoughts.

When he pulled up outside his surgery, he leaned over to the back seat and picked up the latest issue of the Veterinary Record where he

had thrown it when he got into the car that morning. He leafed through it to the classifieds on the back pages and found what he was looking for. It was an advert that had been printed at regular intervals over the last year. He had read it with some surprise the first time he had seen it, and wondered why such an obviously crackpot request had been printed.

TREATED UNUSUAL ANIMALS? Superior intelligence (ability to say ‘sausages' not a qualifying factor)? Abnormalities which may once have given rise to legend? We would like to hear from you.

Please ring 01-356247 at any time.

Now, however, he wondered if the advert was as crazy as it had seemed. He got out of his car and went through the surgery’s back door.

'Hello, Liz,' he greeted his receptionist, ‘any calls?’

'Nothing at the moment, Stuart, she replied, smiling at him. ‘How did the foaling go?’

'Oh, the foal was just badly presented. Simple enough, really’ He shrugged. He went into his office and picked up the phone. He dropped the folded magazine on the desk and held the receiver under his chin whilst he dialled the number. The phone rang a couple of times and then he heard a recorded message

'Inspector Stevens is not in at the moment. If you would like to leave a message, please speak after the tone.’

'Inspector,' Stuart thought, ‘a police officer.’ Until that moment he hadn’t been sure what he was going to say, but as it was the police and not some weirdo, he began at the beginning and told the whole story.

Hugh stepped into his wellies outside the back door, slipped the can from the sill of the kitchen window into his pocket and set off between the rows of vegetables up to the gate into his field. When he reached it he paused and examined he sheep. There was no doubt about which one he wanted – all but one of the flock were up at the top of the field. The solitary one sat in a corner by itself, its black and white face pointing in his direction.

He pushed open the gate and immediately the sheep rose unsteadily to its feet. Hugh went to the other corner of the field where a small barn stood, and opened the door. He circled widely round the sheep and waved his arms until it set off moving. Because he had brought it in every day for the last three days, it helpfully made straight for the barn. For a moment it seemed to be dithering between going in or making a break up the hill, but it finally decided to go right in. Hugh pulled the door shut behind him and turned on the bare light bulb. The sheep cowered in a corner and Hugh easily flipped it

on to its back and clasped its sides between his knees.

He looked down at the matted mess on its underbelly. It seemed a little better than the day before so he gave it a light tug. Immediately a small amount of bleeding broke out and he decided to leave it. The mass of hair and skin surrounding it looked free of maggots, so Hugh took out the can of antiseptic and gave the area a quick spray. He pushed the sheep back on to its feet and then opened the door to let it out into the field. He flicked off the light and followed the sheep out.

He stood on the hillside and gazed along the valley. The opposite slope was steep and tree-covered, except for where even the soil couldn't cling to the near-vertical rock. To the east lay the houses of Llanfer Ceiriog and to the west the valley twisted round and was filled with low, thick clouds. There were two tiny figures on the road up from the village, but they were too far away to identify.

He closed the shed, went out through the gate and went down to the house. Kicking off his boots he shouted through the kitchen door, 'That young ram still isn't much better.'

'What's that, love?' His wife, Janet, appeared in the doorway, holding two mugs of tea. 'There's just been something on the radio about a wild dog on the loose.'

'Not another giant black panther?'

She laughed. 'No, that's in Derbyshire. They say it's an Alsatian, or a Rottweiler, or some big dog anyway. I just thought you ought to know.'

'Thanks. I suppose I'd better put the sheep inside tonight.'

‘And there was something about someone from the village being in a coach accident on the motorway.'

'Oh yes anyone we know?'

'Emrys Hughes's brother, Selwyn.'

'Not like either of them to be off on a coach trip.’

‘No.' She offered him one of the mugs. 'Here .you are.'

'Oh thanks, love.' He took it and sipped tentatively, at the hot tea. He blew on it a couple of times to cool it. ‘Let’s have a sit down, shall we?' He settled at the table and sniffed at the air. 'Pea soup?' he asked.

'I'm afraid so.'

'Never mind. Best thing in this weather.' .He got up and warmed his rear on the Aga while he cupped his hands around the mug.

His wife looked out at the water-distorted view through the window over the sink. 'You'd hardly believe it's summer, would you?'

At that moment, there came a loud rapping at the front door. Hugh pushed himself away from the warmth of the stove. 'I'll go and see who it is,' he said.

'That's a good idea, love.'

Hugh went into the dark hallway and pulled open the door. 'Hello, Hugh, I've come to stay a few days,' the Doctor said, shaking his wet umbrella over Hugh's feet.

Inspector Stevens chewed the doughy lump of cake contentedly as he watched the faces of people going past the glass front of the cafe. When he had swallowed it he licked his finger and ran it across the surface of the plate to gather up the stray grains of sugar. Then he gulped down the dregs of his coffee.

His lunch over, he rose and went out into the street.

Although officially stationed at New Scotland Yard, Stevens's office was a rented space in a five-storey Georgian house some distance away from central London. He strolled casually back to his office, nodding at familiar faces, occasionally offering a word of greeting. He went into the house and climbed the three flights of stairs. His was an anonymous door, no different from the toilet door across the landing, perhaps an indication of the esteem in which he was held by his fellow police He pushed open the door and entered his cluttered office. Every wall and every surface was filled with useless and useful junk. Overlooking his desk was a blown-up still from Close Encounters of the Third Kind - as lights flew overhead a group of people held up pieces of cardboard bearing the words

'Stay and Be Friendly', On the opposite wall an array of Escher prints surrounded a map of Britain, dotted with coloured pins. His desk was a mass of papers and magazines; balanced precariously at one end was a desktop computer, He walked over to his desk and pushed the 'on' button on the computer, shut a copy of Zodiac that he had been reading, and sat down,

He had always been interested in the supernatural, the paranormal and the mythical. As a boy it had been one of consuming passions which-it had been assumed he would grow out of, But he hadn't, and when he had left police training school it wasn't long before his interest had paid dividends, There had been a series of mysterious crimes, at first sight unconnected but as they progressed further Stevens had become aware of an increasing disturbance in his Chief Constable's behaviour. After some careful observation, and consultation with a mystic friend of his, he had concluded that his superior was being plagued by some sort of poltergeist. Despite resistance, he ha managed to persuade the Chief Constable to be exorcized, and it had worked, The crimes stopped, and Stevens was reward by being made Inspector and only member of the Paranormal Investigations Team, He had had few successes since that time, but enough to keep him in a job, and enough for his colleagues to steer clear of him.

He flicked a switch on his answerphone to check if there had been

any messages. There was one, from a vet called Stuart Taylor who claimed to have discovered a unicorn in Wales. Suddenly Stevens's interest was aroused as his mind groped for a connection. He leaned over to the computer and tapped in the name of the village where the unicorn had supposedly been seen.

LLANFER CEIRIOG, he typed. The computer buzzed softly and after searching through files stored miles away it came up with a report.

COACH ACCIDENT, M40. CASUALTIES TAKEN TO CONDICOTE GENERAL HOSPITAL.

IDENTIFICATION FOLLOWS.

HUGHES, Selwyn.

M

LLANFER CEIRIOG Deceased

?

M

?

?

F

?

Deceased

?

M

?

Deceased

There were a series of question marks. He could scroll the screen to one side to get descriptions but that wasn't what he was interested in. Only one of the casualties was identified. Stevens remembered, now, that he had heard on the radio that only the driver in the accident had been named.

It seemed to him that it might be significant that the passengers were nameless. Recently he had been investigating disappearances. Every year hundreds, maybe thousands of people vanished without trace and it had occurred to him that maybe there were some less than rational explanation for this. But in his investigations he had uncovered a more startling fact – over the last thirteen months, rather than vanishing, people had actually been appearing in cities. They had names alright, but they had no birth certificated, no driving licenses, no passports, nothing. Officially they didn't exist, but he had met them and so he knew they were there. They formed a tight-lipped community which protected itself from outsiders like him, and he had no idea where they are coming from.

But here it was, a coachful of people without names, and now he

read a footnote on the computer screen.

INVENTORY OF COACH LUGGAGE COMPARTMENT. 42 SUITCASES CONTAINING IN

TOTAL APPROXIMATELY £2 MILL.

Two million pounds? What on earth was going on here? Here was something to investigate. He was going to pay a visit to Llanfer Ceiriog.

He picked up the phone and called up the Yard. When he finally got through the tortuous switchboard he asked for all the information on the coach accident and informed his immediate superior that he would not be in his office for a couple of days. Then, easing himself out of his seat, he left his office and made his preparations for his journey.

Hugh ushered the Doctor and Ace into the small living room. At the sight of the large armchair by the fire, Ace rushed forward and threw herself down.

'Brilliant!' she said, extending her legs so that her feet were just inches from the grate. She immediately kicked off her trainers and wiggled her toes in the heat.

Excuse Ace, Hugh,' the Doctor said, 'she's from Perivale.'

Hugh nodded as if this explained everything.

'So, he said, 'what brings you back to Llanfer Ceiriog?'

'Ace here wanted to do a spot of rock-climbing and remembered the glorious view from your window. ' He walked over to it and looked out. The far side of the valley was obscured by a mist of rain.

'Ah,' he said, 'well, on a good day you could see those cliffs over there. I hoped you could lend Ace a bed '

'She can have the room that Mel had when you last came. It's still empty, isn't it. How about you?'

'Oh, I don't .need a bed,' the Doctor waved the offer aside. 'I thought I might do a bit of fishing in that stream down the valley.'

The door to the room was pushed open and Janet came in carrying a tray of drinks. A black and white collie slunk in past her legs and, its tail wagging softly, went over and sat by Ace.

'Here's drinks for you all,' Janet said and put the tray down on the dark wooden sideboard.

'Hello, doggie,' Ace said, tickling it under its chin. She pull a crumpled bag out of her rucksack. 'Do you want a sherbet lemon?' she asked the dog. She stroked its ear and looked up at Hugh. 'What is it? A dog or a bitch?'

She s a bitch, and her name's Badger.'

Badger looked up hopefully at the sound of her name, but seeing that there wasn't any food on offer she returned her attention to Ace.

The Doctor took two mugs and handed one to Ace. She balanced it

precariously on the chair arm and carried on stroking Badger.

'Fishing, Doctor?' Janet asked.

'Trout-tickling,' he told her, demonstrating, as he had to Ace, by waggling his fingers.

Hugh laughed. 'I'm not sure you'll catch any trout down in that stream.'

'You'd be surprised at what you can catch around here,' the Doctor told them.

‘Ignore him,' Ace said. 'He enjoys being mysterious, don't you, Professor?'

‘Why don't you go and have a look at the rockface?' the Doctor suggested.

‘Oh but it's raining, Professor,' Ace protested.

‘A little bit of water never hurt,' Janet joined in.

‘Oh. all right.' Ace reluctantly relinquished her position by the fire and the Doctor quickly took her place. As she reached the door she turned and asked, 'Can I take Badger with me?'

Badger jumped to her feet, swinging her tail wildly.

‘Oh, go on,' Hugh gave his permission. 'She likes a good walk.’

'Thanks. See you later.' She went out and moments later the front door slammed shut.

Jane t turned to the Doctor and said, 'So, Doctor, whatever happened to Melanie?'

‘Lovely girl,' Ace said as Badger leapt up at her, tongue lolling. She bent, picked a small stone from the ground and flung. it down into the valley. Badger barked and headed off after it. Ace could just about see the cliff, her destination, though the valley was filled with mist. She got down to the road, climbed over the stone wall and ran carelessly down the wet grass. She skidded to a halt just inches from the end of the field, carving a furrow in the soft earth.

As she reached the wall, Badger rose up from behind it, gave a mighty 'woof!' and dashed into the trees beyond. Ace followed her on to the muddy ground. She gave a look down at her mud-stained legs and wished she'd worn something more sensible. She hadn't realized it would be quite like this, but as she was already dirty she thought she might as well carry on.

She could hear a stream somewhere amongst the trees and aimed for that. By now the ground was level and she could see the cliff rising above the leaves. When she finally got to the stream she found that it ran just a few feet away from the sheer rockface. She jumped across the water and gazed at the wall of rock. At the moment it was far too slippery for any climbing. It would have to have the sun on it for a couple of hours first. She turned away from it and looked back into

the trees where she could see Badger's black and white form dashing back and forth.

She had hardly been out of the house for ten minutes and so she decided to have a wander alongside the gurgling water. She walked upstream and slowly the cliff became less steep and fell away from her.

Eventually she saw that she would be able to climb up the valley side and, there being nothing to stop her, she did so.

She had to dig her toes in and lean forward, but the going wasn't particularly hard, even with Badger dancing around her feet. Nearing the top, she found her way blocked by a barbed wire fence. A few feet behind the fence a battered wooden sign announced, 'Trespassers Will Be Shot'.

The barbed wire by itself might have deterred Ace from going any further, but she felt a particular animosity towards people who stuck signs into the ground. She carefully pushed the wire down and slowly eased herself over it, at the last moment giving a slight hop as she had to let go. Badger stood on the opposite side of the fence and barked at her. Ace could see that the dog could jump the fence easily and so she called to her. Immediately Badger started whining and ran off down the hill, her tail between her legs.

Ace shrugged and carried on up the hill. When she reached the top she looked down into the next valley. At the east end there was a house, but apart from the bare slopes, the rest of the valley was filled with trees. Now that she was here she thought that she might as well go down and have a look. She descended the slope and went into the trees.

It was dark and quiet there. The canopy of leaves was thick and seemed to only let through the occasional drop of water. It wasn't that there was no birdsong, but it was strangely muted as though the humid air dampened the sound.

The trees had the feel of being ancient, their very sap drawn out of the past. It wasn't just that they were old and moss-clad, for not all of them were, but they were of the stock that had made up Britain's woodlands many centuries ago. Not for them the strict regimentation and clear cut borders of man-made plantations; these trees had grown with no order, other than the unguessable laws of Mother Nature, imposed upon them.

Suddenly Ace came upon a track through the woods. It was wide enough for a car and was well trodden by a great many fresh footprints. Ace decided to follow the track away from the house she had seen, as this seemed to offer the least chance of detection. As she progressed the trees around her grew less dense and she began to

notice piles of rubble lying half covered by weeds and grass. They were irregularly shaped, but Ace could pick out enough of a pattern to see that they corresponded to where buildings had once been. She wandered amongst them and found a well, seemingly intact. She was unable to resist dropping a stone in and was pleased to hear a satisfying splash when it hit the invisible water.

She returned to the path and carried on along it. It came to an end at a wide clearing. The trees which bordered the clearing stood a few feet beyond the boundaries of a circle of standing tones. Apart from two large stones on opposite sides of the circle, they were low lying and several of them were on their sides.

Ace was about to walk out into the centre of the circle when she heard a sound behind her - a metallic snap. She whirled around and found herself confronted by a tall, gaunt man wearing threadbare clothes and pointing a gun at her. She guessed by the way he held it that he would have no compunction against using it.

'What the bleedin' hell are you doing here?' he asked her. The gun was aimed unwaveringly at her chest.

'Don't point that thing at me,' Ace told him.

'I'll point it where I bloody like.' His hands tightened their grip on the gun.

'You can't shoot me, you know.' Ace didn't have much respect for justice in Britain but in this case she sought its shelter. 'It's against the law.'

But then, without taking his eyes off her, he squeezed the trigger all the way.

2:

Strange Beasts

A brief flick of his eyes to one side was all the acknowledgement Old Davy gave to the coach which drew to a rapid halt in front of the mock-Tudor facade of the Black Swan. Every day it passed through the village, but it had never paused in its journey before. Like everything else, this was hardly unusual enough for Davy to divert his attention towards it.

Almost as soon as it had stopped it began to move again, revealing two teenagers standing by a pile of rucksacks and sleeping bags. One of them, tall and dark-haired, threw an empty can at the rear windscreen of the coach, missing by several yards.

'Hey, I hope your engine explodes,' he shouted belligerently at the accelerating coach.

'Cool it, David,' the other laid a restraining hand on his shoulder. He was shorter than David and wore a blue, padded raincoat.

'No I won't cool it, Jack,' David brushed him off. 'You jerk,' he called to the absent driver, 'I hope you get tyre rot!'

'Don't be stupid, there's no such thing,' his friend told him.

' No? Well there oughta be. Jeez, I hate this country.' He looked around himself. Three roads led out of the village. At the centre of the junction a small patch of grass sprouted a spreading oak tree whose leaves brushed against the black and white walls of the pub on one side, the red and yellow sign of a post office on another side and overhung a rainbow-filled garden on the third side. David put out his hand to feel the rain and looked up at the drab sky. 'It's so sunny all the time,' he said sourly. I bet they've never even heard of a malignant melanoma.'

Jack ignored his friend. After all, it had been David's idea to go for a quick wander around Wales before spending the rest of their vacation at home in America. He hefted his rucksack on to his back, the sleeping bag dangling by two short pieces of fraying string. 'Come on, we'd better get going.'

Where the heck are we, anyway?' David asked, shouldering his pack, 'Stupid driver, dumping us in the middle of nowhere.'

'Well, we're somewhere between Oswestry and Portmeirion. Why don't we ask at the post office?'

'Okay, you do that. I'll just wait here.' He plunged his hands into the deep pockets of his bright red anorak and started to whistle 'Men of Harlech'.

'Right, I'll go over and ask. Right.' Jack went over to the post office and tried the door. It was locked.

He shook the handle as if this might somehow make it a little less locked. Peering through the wire-meshed glass, he searched amongst the American Express, Daily Mirror and 'It is against the law to sell cigarettes to under-16s' stickers for some indication of when it was open. Eventually he found it and discovered that the post office was shut between one and two o'clock. He looked at his watch and found that he had thirty-eight minutes to wait.

He stomped back over to David who had acquired a pint glass from somewhere.

'Oh shoot, David. How is it you've got enough money for that but you couldn't pay the full coach fare?'

'Llanfer Ceiriog.'

'What?'

'We're ... ' He took a sip from the glass. 'We're in Llanfer Ceiriog. Get the map out, Jack.'

Jack looked resentfully at David's drink as he swung his rucksack down on to the ground and rooted through the pockets for the ragged Ordnance Survey map. He unfolded it and tried to hold it so that the light breeze didn't blow it around and so that it presented the minimum surface area to the continual drizzle. He scanned the names, lines and symbols until he eventually found the boldly printed 'Llanfer Ceiriog' at the meeting point of three roads.

‘Here it is,' he said, pointing it out to David. He quickly relinquished his hold as the map was pulled away from him.

'Where? Let me see.' David waved the map around in one hand until it was reasonably easy to read.

He studied it briefly and then said, looking around, 'Which road did we come in on?’

Jack realized that he hadn't the faintest idea. 'Uh, it was one, wasn't it?'

'Yeah, I think you're right. Put on your pack, Jack. We go this way.'

Old Davy watched as the two young Americans strode along the road up to Emrys's valley and wondered why hadn't looked at the signpost in the middle of the junction. He didn't even flinch when he heard David's glass smash.

It was probably when they had been passing through a small utterly forgettable town, nestling happily in a twist of the Rhine that Jack had realized what a complete lunatic his travelling companion was. Jack had known David for quite some time and had thought that he had known him quite well for most of that time. The crossing of the English Channel seemed to have changed David's character irretrievably.

Maybe it was the drinking water.

To return to the town on the Rhine, however, it was a rather drab, dull and boring day and they had been making their way to a goats'-milk-cheese-tasting festival. They had been walking alongside a murky pool which had been cut off from the river by the drought afflicting the entirety of continental Europe, when suddenly, and with no warning, David had dropped his backpack and leapt head first into the oily, stagnant waters. Seconds later he re-emerged, spluttering and triumphantly clutching a lady's silk undergarment. And this was before he had spent five hour tasting free samples at a nearby vineyard.

After trying the German wine, of course, David had wandered around wearing the silk underwear on his head - but at that level of intoxication it was understandable. It was just the initial retrieval that had shaken Jack up.

Since then, Jack had had frequent cause to ponder on the condition of David's sanity. After a month of climbing ships' funnels, lying down in Italian fountains, swimming in the North Sea at two in the morning and doing things to donkeys that even a Spaniard would balk at, it should have come as no surprise that David should suddenly fling a half-empty beer glass against a wall, slip out of the straps of his rucksack and leap head first into the thick, wet grass of the roadside verge. In fact it was almost an exact repetition of the underwear incident except that this time David arose clutching in one hand a rather startled-looking frog.

'Christ sakes, David, what did you do that for?' Jack asked, indicating the fragments of glass.

David ignored this. 'Got us something to eat, Jack. Make a nice change from beans.'

'Don't be disgusting.'

'Hey, what's so disgusting about eating frogs? The French do it all the time.'

Jack picked up the rucksack and held it out for David. No they don't, they just eat the legs. Even they aren't sicko enough to eat the whole frog. Only a Pennsylvanian would do that.'

David held the frog up to the light and examined it more closely. 'Maybe it's not a frog, Maybe it's a toad.'

'What difference does It make? Jack Sighed.

'I wonder how you tell? Do frogs have warts and toads not?'

'How the heck should I know, David?'

'You're the biology student. Come on, what s the difference between a frog and a toad?'

'Is this a joke?'

'Hey no, I'm serious. What's the difference? Maybe its like toadstools and mushrooms - maybe toads are poisonous.' To Jack's

horror, David suddenly brought the frog up to his mouth and started chewing.

'Hmmm ... nope, no ill effects ... must be frog.'

'David!'

'You're such a dork, Jack.' He opened his hand and let the frog hop off into the grass. He took his pack and slung it on to his back, then he started walking.

Jack had to take a few quick steps to catch up with him. ‘That was gross. You're one sick guy, you know that?'

David continued looking forward and merely replied, 'Ribbit!'

'Shut up, David!'

'Ribbit!'

'Shut up, David!'

'Ribbit!'

About a mile and a half outside the tiny crossroads which had appeared to make up the entirety of Llanfer Ceiriog, the road dipped down between the two hillsides and turned a right angle so that it ran along the valley bottom. Trees crowded into the level ground and overhung the badly cracked and pocked tarmac through which poked the occasional tuft of lush grass. Even beyond the high precipitation so normal in the British Isles, the air was damp and muggy and Jack felt perspiration begin to bead his brow as he and David meandered down the descending road. He peered into the dimness under the thick, leafy roof in the hope of seeing some of the native wildlife. Nothing moved, but in the distance he could hear a whippoorwill shouting its characteristic call out to the world. He corrected himself in his thoughts - it wasn't a whippoorwill here. In England, rather Wales, it should be called a night jar.

He stumbled as his foot twisted in a fissure in the road. It was definitely getting more and more dilapidated.

'Hey, Kermit, are you sure this is the right road?'

David shrugged. 'You looked at the map, you tell me.' Jack recognized the stages leading up to another miscarriage of justice. Stage one was David making a decision. Stage two was Jack discovering that David's decision was wrong. Stage three was David maintaining that it had been Jack's decision.

Stage four was Jack getting angry whilst David remained perfectly calm. Inevitably the blame for them coming along this road would ultimately lie with him. He decided to avoid David’s suggestion of guilt completely.

'Well, I don't think it is,' he said. 'I mean, British roads may be bad, but a major road shouldn't have potholes like this There was no doubt at all that the holes in the road were huge - he almost expected a

bearded university lecturer in a hard hat and luminous yellow waterproofs to appear from one and start to enthuse about the marvellous rock formations in the subterranean world. 'Maybe we should go back?'

he suggested, stopping walking.

'Aw, come on Jack, it must lead somewhere. Let's give it a couple more miles.'

Jack threw a daggered look at David's back but followed, mumbling angrily to himself. Indeed, after only a further half mile of the 'couple more miles' the road was abruptly cut off by a tall metal mesh gate from which various notices in Welsh and English hung tattily, drawn as they were on the sides of soggy supermarket boxes. The words were written in an erratic, spidery hand.

'Keep out!' one announced tersely in black ink. The message was continued n a second card a few inches below 'Trespassers will be SHOT!'

'Looks like the end of the road,' Jack said with a definite tinge of smugness affecting his voice.

Futilely David rattled the gates but they were held securely by a large, highly polished padlock and chain. He turned and surveyed his surroundings with a calculating look in his eyes.

'I reckon that it we cut across those woods, we'd get on to the main road in no time.'

'No, David,' Jack protested, knowing that he had already lost the argument to the forces of illogic.

'Why don't we just walk back along the road?'

'Jack,' David gave his winning smile, 'Jackie boy, have you seen what time it is? If we go all the way back there we'll probably end up camping in the middle of nowhere and, forgive me for saying it, in this weather that is something I, for one, can do without. Do you read what I'm saying, man, like, are we on a similar wavelength here?'

Jack counted very slowly up to ten, and then through gritted teeth he said, 'David, I am already soaked to the skin and I have no desire , no desire whatsoever, you know, even if I'd just had Lake Michigan emptied over me, to tramp through uncharted tracts of knee-length sodden grass just to cut a lousy hour off walking to some godforsaken place.'

The sudden transition that David underwent was amazing in its extremity. From talking like some sort of sixties reject he switched over to total aggression. He waved his fist in Jack's face and shouted,

'Hey Jack, if you want to get your butt frozen off unnecessarily well then that's just cool, just fine,, just hunky dory, but don't expect me to feel the same way. I'll see you in New England.' He turned and stormed off the road. A few feet into the reeds he vanished with a yell.

Alarmed, Jack dashed forward. David lay collapsed in a heap at the bottom of a six-foot ditch, concealed by the tall grass. Suddenly David burst out laughing and Jack had to join him. He nodded his head.

'Okay, David, we'll go your way,' he agreed.

They followed the fence through the trees but when it suddenly rose precipitously up the hillside they decided to take the route of least effort. A V-shaped gash in the hillside offered a quick passage into the next valley. It also gave some relief from the long, damp grass, though the replacement, a slippery sheen of dark red mud, wasn't much better. Thankfully, the brief altercation had cleared the air between the two Americans and had lifted their spirits considerably.

In the next valley the trees clustered around them again, though maybe not quite as thick as before.

Eventually they reached a stream running through the bottom of the valley. At this level, the stream was a bit too wide, deep and, importantly, wet for them to cross. They decided to walk along it until it grew narrow enough for them to jump.

The muted woodland sounds were overlaid with the constant sound of water running inexorably downwards between sky and soil. In the distance a dog barked, driven to distraction by some unseen diversion. Even the drizzle had fallen to a minimum and occasional shafts of sunlight danced fitfully on the water. A rainbow, like a phoenix rising from the ruins of the afternoon, spread across the sky. Jack found his breathing becoming more and more relaxed as he basked in the pleasurable sensations.

.'Now. this is better,' said David, obviously enjoying the stimulation as much as Jack. 'The weather's finally sorted itself out.'

'Don't say anything,' Jack warned him, 'it could change a moment s notice - you should know that.'

‘Yeah. Hey, you know, there's something familiar about this place, I . . .' He shook his head as though to dislodge the memory from its dusty shelf high above the central processing unit.

Jack examined the stream. 'I guess we could get across now' he said.

‘No, if we carry on along here we'll meet the road eventually.'

‘What? How do you know? You're just making that up.’

'No, I think I've been here before. Let me look at the map. ' Jack turned round and let David rummage. through his rucksack. He tugged the map free and opened it wide. Holding it in one hand, he tracked across it with his index finger until he found Llanfer Ceiriog. 'Look,' he said, 'this is the stream and the road to... to Gwydyr crosses it just here. See?'

‘You're right! How about that? You really have been here before!'

‘Hey, what am I? A sky-brain?' He slapped his forehead. ‘Course I've been here. Llanfer Ceiriog - my mom and dad used to come camping here when they first met at Uni. I remember now, I was five years old . . .'

He was five years old, and he was hopelessly lost in the woods. 'Mommy! Mommy!' he shouted, bawling at the top of his voice. There was no reply and he began to cry, snuffling in between repeating his call.

It was a horrid wood. At first he had liked it because he was getting covered in mud and could play at being Flash Thunderbolt, Leader of the Freeforce Warriors, hiding behind the trees and occasionally risking a shot at the loathsome Clawmen. When, at last, he had finally caught the evil Gagnak he had noticed that it had started raining and the skies had changed to a glowering dark grey that turned the wood into a nasty place full of shadows. He realized that in the pitched laser battle he had completely lost his sense of direction.

Now the mud was sucking at him, holding him back; the trees clawed at him and when he tried to shelter from the rain the trunk glistened repulsively with green slime. Panic-stricken he ran, stumbling, through the maze of trees until he arrived at the bank of the stream. On the far side was an overhanging rockface where he could cower away from the worst of the rain. He splashed across the icy water of the stream and . stood shivering. Apart from the splash, splash, splash of the ram and the gurgling stream there was no sound. He let out another heartrending cry.

'Mommy! Daddy! Where are you?'

In the woods, on the other side of the stream, something moved. He peered into the gloom and began to chew savagely on his thumb. What was it? Again he saw a dark flash between two trees - moving closer. .

'Mommy?' he whimpered, scared even more than before.

There it was again, darting between the trees. He began to run, slipping and sliding, alongside the stream, not looking back. And then he had fallen, fallen, fallen . . .

Fallen into his Mommy's consoling arms. The nightmare forgotten, consigned to the mists of oblivion, but it lingered at the edges of his subconscious, waiting to re-emerge. And something else lingered too. And the place remained in his mind ...

'I remember now, I was five years old. Mom and Dad brought me here once and then the year after we moved home to the States. Jeez, ain't this a coincidence?' For some reason he gave a slight shiver at the

thought, as though a shadow had just fallen upon his grave. 'The place hasn't changed much.' He looked around wonderingly.

The stream was now pulling out of the woods and beginning to run in a gully cut out of the hillside. It was shallow enough that in places its rocky bed projected above the water.

‘I can’t remember anything from when I was that young.’ Jack decided after straining his memory,

'except getting a kiss off Rosie Bond for a quarter.'

David laughed coarsely. 'I bet even back then she kissed like . . . What the heck?'

'What is it?'

'Look up there.' David pointed up the stream. Lying in the water was a horse, one of its legs projecting at an unsightly angle. There appeared to be a rider crushed under the weight of the huge animal. Neither was moving.

Jack and David set off at a run up the stream bed. As he went Jack couldn't help noticing that the rider was naked from the waist up.

Within a few seconds they were standing over the horse. David’s eyes widened in surprise and Jack crouched down get a closer look.

‘Jesus ,Christ,' he said softly, and turned to look up at David, ‘this isn't a man, it's a goddam centaur!'

There could be no doubt about it in either of their minds. The creature before them had the body of a horse, but where its head should have been there was the upper half of a man. Fine hair covered his skin, tinting it to the colour of his horse half whilst at the same time the cold turned his skin a pale blue colour. A matted mane hung down his back, mingling with the mud of the stream bed. One of his legs was very obviously broken.

After the initial shock had worn off, they were nonplussed as to what they should do. Jack felt around for some signs of life.

‘Where do you look for a pulse in a centaur? I’ve tried in the wrist and there's maybe something but I can't be sure.'

‘Try the jugular,' suggested David.

‘I have - doesn't seem to be one.'

‘Wait a minute. Here we are.' David was feeling around the leg and had finally detected a fluttering pulse. 'He's alive.!'

‘I think we ought to get him out of the water and cover him up, or he won't be alive for long.'

‘Are you sure we should move him? I mean, with that leg broken and everything?'

‘It’ll kill him if we don't. Come on, you take the front end and I'll push at the back.'

They struggled to little effect for a couple of minutes until, finally

the centaur began to slide over the mud. Once he was moving, they managed to slide him a few inches away from the stream. His flank was still partially immersed, but his human part, which they assumed was the most important segment, was out of the water. Jack took a towel from his rucksack and shoved it under the torso, then he pulled a sweater over the centaur's head.

‘We’ll have to get some help. There's nothing we can do by ourselves.’

‘But, Jack, what are we going to say to someone? "Hi there, we’ve found a centaur, will you help us?" They'll help us all right - into a little white van.'

‘Well, if we find a doctor and just tell him that there's a rider who’s had an accident.'

‘Yeah, okay. One of us will have to stay up here. You go back down to Llanfer Ceiriog and try to phone from the pub. I’ll make some soup up and try to keep him warm.'

‘Right, I'll try and be as quick as I can.'

'I couldn't believe it! I mean, bam! He just shot his gun like that. Bam!'

'All right, Ace, ' the Doctor said soothingly. 'Calm down and start at the beginning.'

Ace took a deep breath and told the Doctor about her trip into the next valley. As she approached the point where the man had fired his gun, she became more and more excited.

'So anyway, I could see that he was about to shoot so I dropped, right, but at the last moment he turned the gun upwards and fired into the air. Then he just poked me with the gun told me to get off his land.'

'That sounds like Emrys, all right,' commented Hugh.

The Doctor turned to him questioningly. 'Emrys?' he asked.

'Emrys Hughes,' Hugh said. 'Him and his family have lived in that valley for the last hundred and fifty years. They won’t have anyone trespassing. His old da was up before the magistrate for giving a walker a backside full of shot not long before ‘e died. Nothing ever came of it, of course. They've got a lot of influence, that bunch. They're an odd lot, an' no mistake.

'What was that about a village?' the Doctor suddenly asked irrelevantly.

'Oh, yeah, right. There was sort of like a load of old ruins. Maybe it was just a farm or something.

There was an old well there too.'

'That'll be Dinorben,' Janet said.

'Dinorben?' Ace asked. The Doctor raised an eyebrow in surprise.

'Dinorben,' Janet repeated. 'I've got something about it in one of

my books. Though, of course, the real person to ask is Leah down in the village. She's the expert on all things local, past and present.' She scanned the bookshelves and finally traced the slim pamphlet she was looking for.

'Why're you interested in the village, Doctor?' Hugh asked

'Oh, I'm interested in everything. Follow every clue, climb every mountain, ford every stream ... '

Ace recognized the telltale signs of the Doctor attempting to conceal something, but as yet there didn't seem to be anything worth concealing.

'Here it is,' Janet said and she began to quote from the pamphlet. ' "In the mid-nineteenth century ten families from Lancashire founded the village of Dinorben three miles to the southwest of Llanfer Ceiriog. Dinorben was set up as a farming cooperative, but for the three years that they remained there, the families had enormous problems, a great many of which they blamed on the local people. All of their sheep were stolen, according to the diary of one of the young girls, and in the last summer the crops were ruined by the actions of some huge beast. Dinorben was emptied overnight, presumably because of the failure to produce even a subsistence crop." '

'Well that's very interesting,' Ace said, clearly bored, but what's it got to do with me being shot at?'

'Be quiet, Ace. Is there anything else, Janet?'

'No, not really, only ... oh yes, here's something. The disappearance of the cooperative was not the first to happen on the site of Dinorben. According to Gildas, a Roman villa somewhere in the vicinity was deserted by its inhabitants with no trace as to where they went.'"

'This is fascinating,' the Doctor told the others. Ace, I think you and I should pay Dinorben a visit.'

'But what about this Emrys bloke?'

'Yes, Doctor. He's a dangerous man, isn't he, Hugh-bach?'

'Oh, I shouldn't think we'll have any problems. How about something to eat first?'

Feet squelching, Jack followed the road down the valley into Llanfer Ceiriog. Every time his feet hit the ground, water oozed up between his toes, trickling unpleasantly into the fibres of his thick woollen socks. And then, like a sponge, the sole reabsorbed the water in preparation for another outflow. It was a form of water torture which Jack had not expected to encounter during the summer months, but had he really expected to be spending those months in the British Isles?

He trudged on and wondered how he was going to persuade a vet to come and minister to a centaur -

and was it really a vet they wanted? After all, half of a centaur is human. Maybe he should get a doctor?

Maybe he should call the police? Maybe even get them all? No, he decided, a vet first as it was the leg that was broken and, once somebody with authority was involved, the rest would become easier.

Jack looked at his watch and his eyes widened. Good grief. It was coming up to five o'clock - they had spent four hours wandering around Llanfer Ceiriog and its environs. A thick bank of grey cloud was beginning to settle on the tops of the hills and was giving every impression that it would sink further. He hoped that David would be all right by himself.

When he finally reached the road junction Jack hurried to the unusual phone booth by the post office.

He tugged at the door but it wouldn't open. When at last he managed to open the small panel and found the phone, the dialling tone was absent there didn't appear to be any point in trying to use it. Apart from that, he had no idea what number he should be ringing. In disgust he slammed the blue panel closed and turned to look around himself. Being a student, his attention immediately focused on the pub; there would almost certainly be a phone there.

When he entered, everything was quiet. It didn't go quiet - there weren't surly natives glaring at him and muttering dark things about going up to the castle after dark - it was just quiet, except for a luridly flashing fruit machine which trilled noisily to itself once in a while. Jack searched in his pockets for his few remaining coins and then made his way over to the bar. He stood drumming his fingers and looking about the place and was just on the verge of coughing loudly to himself when the barman appeared, heralded by a triumphant whoop from the fruit machine.

'Um ... a half of mild, please ... and do you have a phone I could use?'

'Half of mild, sir, very good. And what are you doing in these parts?'

'Oh, you know, just passing through. Hiking.'

'Hiking, eh? Good thing for a lad your age. See the world while you still can, before you get tied down to one place with a boring job, wife and kids. American, aren't you?'

'Yeah, you noticed, huh? Do you have a ... '

'I went to America a few years back. Didn't like it one bit. The only thing louder than Americans is their shirts. Bloody awful place if you don't mind me saying so.' He handed over the glass.

'No, that's all right, I hate the British too.' Jack wished that David had been there to say that, but he wasn't, so Jack just shrugged non-

committally.

‘Forty-two pence, sir. Thank you very much.'

‘Thanks, do you have a phone I could use?'

‘Just over there, in the corner.'

A dog-eared copy of the Yellow Pages rested on a ledge underneath the phone and it was the work of a moment to flick through and find the section headed 'Veterinary Surgeons & Practitioners'. He dropped a couple of coins into the phone and dialled a likely number. While he listened to the ringing, he turned and watched the barman assiduously polishing the already gleaming oak surface.

'Hello, Evans, Riley and Skerritt Veterinary Practice. Can I help you?'

‘Ah yes. There's been a sort of accident with a horse Just off the road between Gwydyr and Llanfer Ceiriog, and I ... '

The beeps started and Jack fumbled another coin into the slot.

‘. . . not really within this practice's area. Perhaps .you should call Mr Taylor in Gwydyr.' The receptionist gave him a phone number and he traced it in the directory.

‘Oh, thanks very much.'

‘My pleasure. Goodbye.'

‘Bye.' Jack rang the new number. This time he got a recorded message.

'Mr Taylor is not in at the moment, but if you would like to leave details after the tone, he will get back to you as soon as he has returned from his rounds.'

Jack left a brief message and then put down the phone. He sat at one of the tables and sipped the rest of his drink. A paper discarded on an adjacent table caught his eye. He had been in England long enough to know that the *Daily Spotter* was the equivalent of the States' *National Enquirer* and he wondered what they would pay for actual pictures of a real-life centaur. Eagerly he picked up the newspaper and searched its pages. He found what he was looking for and returned to the phone.

‘Hello, Newbury here. What is it?' a bored voice asked.

‘Hi, I'm an American. I'm visiting Wales and I've seen something that I thought your paper might like to run a feature on.'

'I very much doubt it, son. I mean there's nuffink in Wales but sheep and nobody's interested in them.

'Cept the Welsh. And we've done all the rest - Celtic fertility rights, human sacrifice, Tom Jones's love life - we seen it, guv, and so’s Joe Public.'

'No, no, this is something different. This is a centaur’

'A what? Centre of what?'

'No, a centaur. You know, half man, half horse.'

'You what?'

Jack carefully explained about centaurs - there had, after all, been some use in playing Dungeons and Dragons for most of the time he was suffering puberty. Eventually the reporter summed up.

'So, you're saying that somebody's been crossing men with the gee-gees?'

Although he couldn't be seen, Jack shrugged his shoulders and said, 'Hey, could be.'

Newbury snorted. 'Pull the other one.'

'What would you pay for photos?'

'We only pay on sight. Fifty quid maybe.'

'Right, I'll be in touch. Bye.' He dropped the phone. It had been worth the try. Money comes to those who sell sensational pictures.

He drained his glass and left it in the centre of the table. The barman's eyes followed him as he went out. He had been one of the very few customers that Arthur Denver had these days ever since he had somehow managed to get himself on the wrong side of the Welsh populace.

When Arthur had arrived in Llanfer Ceiriog he'd understood the feelings that caused such anger among some people – he'd lived in the countryside and knew only too well the irritation of city folks and their holiday homes. He'd thought that situation was different. After all, he was working, not just leaving a perfectly good house unoccupied for eleven months of the year. But one night he'd made a bad mistake. There was one farmer who seemed to intimidate the other villagers and that night he'd been going out of his way to be as loud mouthed and obnoxious as he possibly could be to a group of tourists.

Arthur had thrown him out, to general applause from all those present. But then it had all gone wrong.

He couldn't say that the farmer was a member of Meibion Glyndwr but he'd done something to persuade others that it would be in their best interests not to frequent the Black Swan. Some of Arthur's neighbours gave him pitying smiles but nothing more.

Only Old Davy, oblivious to changes in the world around him, remained his loyal customer. It wasn't enough - soon the Black Swan would pirouette its last and settle to the ground with its wings folded over its head in a deathly embrace. Arthur was leaving.

Jack wondered what he should do. He'd called the vet and given him the details, or at least he'd given believable details, and now he really ought to go back up to David. But his limbs were aching with the fatigue induced by several hours walking in dampness. He was on the verge of going back into the pub and hunkering down in front of the fire when down the road from the east he saw a figure descending

at some speed on an ancient bicycle. There could be no mistaking that this was the village policeman - a stocky individual bombing right out of a Hollywood London astride a battered Raleigh that had seen far better days.

As the policeman neared, Jack waved at him to stop, eliciting a high banshee wail of brakes against metal which brought the bike to a halt a few inches from Jack's feet.

'Hello there, boyo. What can I do for you, eh?'

‘You're a police officer?'

‘No, lad, I'm a ballet dancer. I just wear the uniform over me tights.'

‘Uh, yeah, well, I'd like to report an accident.’

‘Mmmm?'

‘Up in the hills,' Jack elaborated.

‘So what's happened?'

‘Me and a friend of mine were walking over to Gwydyr along the stream that runs up this valley.'

The policeman nodded. 'I know where you mean . . .‘

'We found this, um, well, sort of a horse-rider. His horse has fallen and broken its leg and he's been lying in the water so, you know, he may have pneumonia or something.'

'A horse-rider, you say? Just a horse-rider?'

'Well, yeah, sort of. The thing is . . .'

'Is it near to where the stream crosses the Gwydyr road?'

‘About a kilometre below it.'

'And your friend's up there, is he? What's his name?'

'David, David Gibson. I'm Jack Pilgrim.'

'Right, thanks for reporting it. I'll get up there and do something about it.'

Without another word, the policeman kicked off and began pedalling furiously away. Jack shouted after him, 'What should I do?' but got no response. He resigned himself to walking back up to David.

But first he turned back to the pub. He gave an uneasy smile to the old man sitting on the bench beside the door and then went back in.

'Hi, again.' Arthur looked up in surprise.

'Oh, hello, back so soon?'

'Could you cash some traveller's cheques for me?'

A worried frown crossed Arthur's face as he wondered whether the interests of customer relations extended to such an act. Nothing to lose really.

'How much?' he asked cautiously.

'Twenty?' Jack proposed.

Arthur gave an inward sigh of relief - that much could be coped

with. 'Sure,' he said.

'Great!' Jack scrawled his signature on one of the cheques and handed it over. He saw, as Arthur took out the cash, how sparsely filled the till was.

'Fivers all right? There you go.'

'Thanks very much. Bye.'

Arthur watched him go disappointedly. The lad could at least have bought another drink while he was in.

Ace laid the knife and fork across the emptied plate and sat back contentedly, still savouring the lingering taste sensations. A warm glow perfused her body. She looked across at the Doctor's plate. It was still heaped high with the fourth helping that Janet had given him.

'That was brilliant,' she beamed. 'I could eat it again.'

Janet smiled and answered apologetically, ‘Ah well, I'm afraid the Doctor's scraped the pots bare.'

‘Absolutely delicious. I'd have to think back a couple of centuries to come up with better. Let me see.

Lucretia . . . Stephen . . . Ah yes, Elizabeth's coronation feast, was good.'

‘You were at the Queen's coronation dinner? Ace asked unbelievingly. She'd joined in the royal wedding street party and binged on green jelly and cream buns whilst bunting in patriotic colours waved pathetically between lamp posts. ‘What was it like?'

'Oh, very nice. If only Essex hadn't started throwing drumsticks about.' . .

'Do you remember watching the coronation on the television, Hugh?' Janet asked.

'Couldn't forget it, could I? We all piled into the bus and drove down to Doctor Snape's house in Gwydyr. And Gareth stood in front of me the whole time so I couldn't see a blasted thing. Should've stayed at home and listened to the radio.’

'Who's Gareth?' asked Ace.

'My little brother. Emigrated to Australia in the sixties,' Janet told her.

'Bit on the backside by a bloody great spider and died out there,' added Hugh.

'Oh, sorry.'

'Never mind love, it all happened a long time ago.

‘Nasty things: some spiders,’ the Doctor said. 'I seem to recall one almost killed me. The memories are vague. Redback was it? '

'I don't think he noticed the type.'

'No, I suppose not. Not if he was taken by surprise. This food is really is excellent. You must give me a sample so that I can program it into the TARDIS food machine. He stopped and sighed heavily.

Hugh pushed his plate into the centre of .the table and half rose from his chair. 'Tea?' he asked, looking around.

‘Oh, yes please,' Ace said. The Doctor nodded in agreement.

'That's right, you put the kettle on the Aga, love, and I’ll put the apple pie out.'

They bustled around the tiny kitchen and before long a dish full of pie smothered in thick, creamy custard alighted in front of Ace. She dug in eagerly. By the time she had finished a steamy whistle was just beginning. Hugh poured out the four mugs of tea and set them down in a cluster in the middle the table.

'There you go, take your pick,' he told them and took the milkiest for himself.

Ace slid a mug over and sipped at it, watching the Doctor finish his meal. She began to shift impatiently and finally could contain herself no longer.

'Professor, when are we going to go over to that village? It's six o'clock now. Surely it's about time?'

'Patience is a virtue, my dear,' Janet told her, 'which you have exercised remarkably well. I think the Doctor is waiting until your excursion is less likely to be noticed by our friend, Emrys. Isn't that so, Doctor?' She looked to the small figure for confirmation but he merely gazed down into the swirling vortex of tea in his mug.

'But,' Ace protested, 'if we leave it too late we won't be able to see anything either. Come on, Professor, we've got to do something! '

The Doctor looked up, one eyebrow raised as if he was surprised at her remark. 'Do we, Ace? Do we always have to do something? To interfere? The village interests me so does the circle. Emrys less so.

But this is meant to be a break, R and R, a holiday, a furlough.' ,

'But he shot at me!' And then Ace leaned across the table and said more pointedly, 'And why did the TARDIS bring us here? You can't tell me it was for a holiday.'

'Wasn't it? Maybe she does just need a rest. She's been through bad times recently. She's been damaged - badly. Maybe she needs time to recover.'

'But the cat!'

'I know, I know. But sometimes I feel I ought to resist the flow of events dragging me into involvement. Maybe it's my training struggling to the surface. Perhaps I'm just a bone-weary traveller, perhaps I need a rest too. No exploring ancient, deserted villages, no examining stone circles, no quarrels with irate landowners.'

‘But Professor! What about ... '

The Doctor suddenly leapt to his feet. 'What indeed? What are we waiting for, Ace? We're not the stay-at-home types. Adventure is in our blood and in our souls. Let's see what we can find. Ghosts of long

dead villagers, their chains a-clanking? Primitive druidic rituals performed by the light of a gibbous moon? Who cares? Let's go!'

Ace shook her head in bemusement. 'I wish you'd make up your mind. One moment it's, "I don't feel like it", the next its all go.'

'I am a man of passion and extremes,' the Doctor told her pompously.

'Could almost be a Welshman,' said Hugh, evoking a derisive snort of laughter from Janet.

'Ha! Passions and extremes, that's a good one. I'll have to remember that one, Hugh my love. The only thing you're passionate about is those sheep.'

'And you, my love, and you.'

'Come along, Ace.'

'Right, um, where did I leave my rucksack?'

'I put it in the hall, love,' Janet told her.

'Ta! See you later.'

It being early summer, the sun was still trying to force its way through the clouds, but amongst the trees in the bottom of the valley below Hugh and Janet's farm, pools of shadow and mist swirled together in equal quantities. Ace and the Doctor picked their way through the sparse undergrowth in the direction of the stream, shaking off the snagging of brambles against their clothes with ease.

'A friend of mine once came to Wales,' Ace told the Doctor. 'He stayed in a place called Colwyn Bay.

A complete dump, he said it was. Looked like somebody had picked up a town and lobbed it against a cliff, splat!'

'The splendours of the North Wales coastline should not be mocked,' the Doctor reprimanded her, pushing a branch out of his path. 'There's a wonderful little fish and chip shop in Rhyl whose Spam fritters can't be equalled this side of the Crab Nebula. I must take you there sometime.'

'I don't like Spam.'

'Well, I'll have your Spam then, I love it. Did I ever tell you about the time I visited Wales in the fifties, the 1950s, that is?'

'Yes.'

'Did I? I must remember to stop repeating myself. Did I tell you about the time I visited Wales in the fifties?'

'Yes.'

'I must look up old Garonwy sometime. That 1928 Hibi Blossom you finished off was made by him.'

'I know. Look, here's the stream and the rockface.'

'Looks a bit slippery to go climbing. Perhaps you'd better give it a miss.'

'We can jump across the stream here and then if we go a bit upstream we can go up the hillside.' She leapt across to the other side and waited for the Doctor to follow. He stood gazing upwards, his mind apparently on other things.

'Professor, come on!'

The leap that he performed was amazing. From a standing position he took off in an arc that seemed sure to leave him a foot short of the solid ground, but at the last moment he extended a leg and landed easily. He twirled his brolly, winked at Ace and then set off in the direction she had indicated.

The walk up the valley was easy and even when they turned up the slope the going wasn't hard. Ace found herself slightly out of breath but the Doctor showed no similar signs of weakness. When they reached the barbed wire and the warning notices the Doctor blithely ignored them as Ace had done before. He pressed down the wire with the tip of his umbrella so she could step over and then by another impressive feat of acrobatics held it down for himself while he followed her. A couple of minutes further walk and they arrived on the ridge which looked down into both valleys. They were rather exposed here, the undergrowth in the valley they had just left ending a few metres below the crest of the hill, and though the valley spread before them was filled with trees these did not extend further than the lowest slopes.

'Should we go down?' asked Ace.

'No.' The Doctor put a hand on her shoulder and pulled her down so that they were both crouched.

'Look down there.' He pointed amongst the trees where an indentation in the green surface suggested that the road ran between them. In brief glimpses and flashes, Ace saw a light bobbing slowly along the road - being carried probably, judging by its speed.

‘Well, if he's carrying a torch that means we'll have plenty of warning if he's coming after us.'

‘Not necessarily, Ace. I think for now we should just view the layout of the land. Fix details in our minds for when we actually go there. Now that, I presume, is the site of the stone circle.' In fact the clearing where the circle must be was quite obvious with only a cursory glance.

Ace nodded. 'And the village is around the road just before it ends at the circle.'

Now look over there. That's where the road from Llanfer comes on to Emrys's land. Can you see, there's a gate across the road? And there is Emrys's house. No lights on, but it's still bright enough for that not to be necessary. So for all we know, that light may not be Emrys himself and there may be more than just him wandering the land and

ready to shoot.'

Ace was only half paying attention. 'Look, Professor, he's reached the circle. Look, Professor.' She shook him urgently and pointed down at the circle. Another light had appeared, but this one was unsteady, flickering and twinkling - firelight. As they watched, more and more points of light appeared, moving around the clearing.

‘Looks like quite a meeting, doesn't it, Professor?'

‘Quiet, Ace!' the Doctor muttered.

'Oh, come off it, Professor, you can't possibly hear what they're saying.'

‘Sssh!' The Doctor realized that unless he gave some sort of explanation Ace would continue babbling and drowning out the sound he was listening for. 'There's something about the way those torches are lighting up. It seems quite characteristic but I’m trying to listen for something to confirm it.'

What do you mean?'

'A characteristic air movement that ... No, it's no good, we shall have to go down there to check.

Come on, Ace.'

'Great!' Ace leapt up and started towards the slope. The Doctor caught her just before she went down.

'Not that way, not with all those people down there. We’ll leave it till tomorrow. Let's get back to Hugh and Janet.’

Janet looked up from her paper and gazed across the room to where Hugh was dozing in front of the fire.

A tuft of his white hair fell across his forehead and, judging by the way he shook his head to shift it every couple of minutes, tickled his eyes. She folded the paper neatly and laid it on the sideboard next to her chair. Easing herself forward, she rose and went to nudge Hugh s shoulder softly.

'Love, love, deffrwch!'

'Mmm, what is it?'

'Hadn't you better go and bring the sheep in? There was the warning about a dog on the loose don't forget '

'Oh, yes, I suppose I ought to. 'Doctor and Ace back, are they?'

'No, not yet. '

'Ah.' He seemed to sink back into a doze for a moment. Janet nudged him again. 'Right! The sheep!'

He rose and went into the kitchen. Janet followed him through and watched him pulling on his boots.

'I'll put the kettle on.'

'Good, nice cup of tea'd be wonderful.'

He went out through the back door and Janet watched him going

up to the gate into the field. Then she picked up the kettle and turned to fill it with water.

Ace clambered over the low stone wall that ran alongside the road and lent the Doctor a hand to help pull him over.

‘So. the plan is that we go over there first thing tomorrow morning and have a dekko.'

'Ace! Where in the universe did you pick up that expression?’

'Perivale, I think. Why?'

'It doesn't seem quite you, that's all.' The Doctor paused to brush the accumulated lichen off his trousers and suddenly the air was pierced by a scream.

'That's from the farm!' Ace shouted, setting off at a run up the road.

‘Not from the house,' the Doctor called. He was ignoring the road and had leapt over the opposite wall and was heading across the field towards the small barn behind the house. Ace knew that he must be right and followed suit. The route they were taking would get them to the scream's source much more directly. She looked ahead and saw Janet standing at the gate to the field, one hand clasped across her mouth. Hugh was standing in front of the barn waving threateningly at something hidden by the intervening wall.

Ahead of her the Doctor vaulted the wall and Ace came to a quick halt against it, prepared to jump over should it be necessary. She now saw what they were up against.

On the ground lay a sheep, its fleece streaked red where sharp teeth had torn its flesh. It was still moving slightly and its face writhed to let out a muted, strangled bleating. Crouched over the sheep was . . . a dog? It was silvery-grey with a lithely muscled body, powerful and strong. A wide ruff of hair exaggerated its neck and gave its forequarters a bulky look. Eyes, deep, black and menacing, stared out fiercely above lips, pulled well back to reveal yellow, bloodstained teeth - canines and incisors as effective at their job as any butcher's tools. A savage growl rumbled in the creature's throat and it looked between its assailants wildly, as though trying to decide what move it should make.

In one rapid, fluid motion it flung itself at the Doctor and bore him to the ground. Ace was over the wall in a flash, but she couldn't bring herself to attack this ferocious creature.

‘Janet! Get my gun!' Hugh spoke quietly but firmly. As she started to back away the pitch of the growling rose.

‘No, don't move,' the Doctor said equally firmly, 'I think if I can just ... '

The creature reacted swiftly.

Eyes flashed and teeth struck.

Jack looked at the figure by the road with some surprise. There was no mistaking that coat - it had to be David. But why hadn't he stayed with the centaur? What was he doing up on the road? The figure waved and started walking towards him. Well, he'd get his answers soon enough. Indeed, within a couple of minutes they were within shouting distance.

'Hey, David, what are you doing up here? You're meant to be looking after Joe Centaur.'

'Yeah, well, this policeman guy came along and told me that he'd sort out first aid and that I should come and wait for you so that you didn't miss the stream in the mist.'

They finally reached each other and David turned and continued walking in the same direction as Jack.

'How could I miss the stream, David?'

'I don't know, I was just doing what I was told. Best to do what the cops tell you, you know. '

'Oh, you'd know all about that, wouldn't you?'

'Well, I've been in my fair share of precincts. But hey; Jack, have I got news for you. The horseman came round while you were gone. I think it must be that tomato soup I gave it.'

'Better write to the manufacturers. They may give you samples if you let them use "Our tomato soup brings even centaurs back to life".'

'Do you want to know what he said?'

'Run it by me, David.'

'Here's the stream now, I think we should get down there. He was fading pretty fast when I left, there may not be much more chance to see a living centaur again.'

They hurried down along the stream, making no attempt stop themselves slipping in the mud.

'So what did he say?'

'You know that policeman was sort of weird. He turned up on this old bike, right, he'd ridden it down the stream, but he had this canister with him and, you know, I'd swear it was petrol.'

'Petrol?'

'Yeah, to light a fire to keep Cheiron warm. I was just surprised that he had it with him.'

Jack looked ahead and saw that there was indeed a fire burning in the gully through which the stream ran. But it was so big! And wasn't it moving?

'Oh my God!' he cried. 'What have you done, David?'

David was left standing as Jack hared off.

‘What do you mean, what have I done?'

Jack could have thrown up at the sight that greeted his eyes and the mixed stench of petrol and burning flesh that ripped through his

nose. The policeman stood on the other side of the stream, his face illuminated by the pale light that the ghastly flames gave off.

'Christ, do something,' shouted Jack and now David was beside him trying to kick, throw and splash water on to the burning animal. Jack scooped up mud and smeared it on to smother the flames, but they were too late, far too late. The centaur was dead, there could be no doubt about that.

Jack sobbed quietly to himself. 'You scum,' he wheeled and turned on the policeman, 'you low down, dirty, son-of-a ... '

'All right, lad, that's enough of that. You can save your feelings for something else.'

'Why did you do it?' asked David. He hardly seemed as affected as Jack, just dazed and wondering.

'Had to be done. Orders from far above my head, I'm afraid. If it's any consolation, lad, it didn't feel pain. It was just a laboratory experiment got loose. They should keep their security tighter at them government places.'

'What do you mean?' Jack asked. 'Experiment?'

'Genes, isn't it?' the policeman told them. 'Had to be destroyed, No telling what damage it might have done. Now then, we'd prefer it if you didn't go talking about this to anyone. I've got both your names, can you tell me where you're likely to be staying in the next couple of days?'

'As far away from this as possible,' Jack wanted to say, but David had already broken in with, 'I think we might be sticking around for a couple of days. Maybe in the pub in Llanfer, maybe I'll pitch our tents in a field.'

'Right, fine. Well, I'll be getting along now. Remember, not a word to anyone.' He picked up his bike and walked off up the stream. When he was out of sight, Jack turned to David and asked him what the hell he thought he was doing.

'Look, Jack, there's something going on here. I don't believe this stuff about government research and neither did that policeman.'

'How could he just walk away from this like that,' Jack asked, 'I mean, how could he?'

'I think we should too. There's nothing we can do for him now. I think we should get down to the village, cash a couple of traveller's cheques and stay the night in the pub. Tomorrow morning we can raise hell about this.'

'But shouldn't we do something about the ... the body?' Jack protested.

'Like I said, there's nothing we can do for him. I've got photos so we've got some evidence. I tell you, somebody's going to pay for this. '

Hugh and Janet were both shaken by their experience and sat in silence at the table, clutching their mugs tightly. Ace and the Doctor stood in a corner of the kitchen and talked quietly to each other. After the animal had loped off into the distance, carrying the dead sheep easily between its jaws, they had huddled into the house and the Doctor had made a pot of tea.

'Professor?' Ace asked. He didn't say anything, so she carried on. 'It wasn't a dog on the loose, was it?'

'No, Ace.'

'It wasn't just an Alsatian, was it?'

'Quite right, Ace.'

'It was a wolf, wasn't it?'

'Canis lupus, commonly known as the grey or timber wolf? No, not that either. A much older relative I should say. Definitely wolfish, though.'

Hugh looked up from the table, 'But that's ridiculous, Doctor, there aren't any wolves in Wales.'

'Then there are some very solid hallucinations around. I'll go out and bring in the rest of the sheep for you, Hugh. And then, Ace, I think bed might be in order. We may have a lot to do tomorrow. '

3:

Missing Persons

Stevens shifted uncomfortably, moving his mass from one side of the seat to the other. He blearily opened his eyes and gazed for a moment at the cream-coloured roof of his car before making another determined effort to sleep. Unfortunately he had a natural aversion to sleeping anywhere but in a bed.

He still wasn't quite sure why he'd decided to spend the night in a lay by in Wales. If he'd set off a few hours later, he could have arrived fresh and alert.

His arm was rapidly deadening where it was pressed against the door and Stevens at last gave up his charade. He switched on the light and reached across to the glove compartment where a thick book had been wedged with no regard to the effect this would have on its pages. He leafed through it idly, wondering what point he had stopped at when he had last been forced to resort to reading it. He had picked it up in a motorway service station after discovering that it had been penned by an MP under pseudonym. It contained little of interest; even the so-called ‘erotic scenes' billed on the cover took up only a single page very early on. The tabloids had made a big thing of the whole affair, printing extracts in italics with the occasional word highlighted in capitals, but Stevens had been disappointed to discover that they all heralded from page 63 and the rest of the book was occupied with a rather tame and predictable love story . He propped open the book on the steering wheel, tore off a page corner to chew, and made another effort to read it. He fell asleep.

The rising sun finally woke him and, after retrieving the book from where it had fallen, he started the car and set off down into Gwydyr. One hand on the wheel, he searched the radio for something to listen to, but the only signal that came through loud and clear seemed to be a Welsh language gardening programme - at least they mentioned rhododendrons a couple of times.

It was half past seven by the time he drove into the small town of Gwydyr and it took him a further twenty minutes to find a cafe that was open, though while driving around he did locate the vet's surgery - locked, of course. He sat in the cafe with two cups of strong coffee and a bacon sandwich dripping with melted butter and read a copy of the *Spotter* that he had found as the sole occupant of a wire-frame newspaper rack. Its front cover bore the headline 'What a loony!' followed by a story about the president of the United States who, apparently, had taken to bathing in cranberry sauce. It took all sorts to make a world, Stevens supposed.

He polished off his breakfast and prepared to leave but decided that a second sandwich wouldn't go amiss, or a third for that matter; half past eight saw him devouring his fifth. That finished, he finally managed to persuade himself that there was such a thing as excess and left. The vet might be at his surgery now so Stevens drove round to it, even though it was only fifty yards up the road.

Standing in the porch, he rang the doorbell and read the white on blue lettering of the small sign.

Stuart Taylor BVSc held surgeries between 8.30 a.m. and 9.30 a.m. and between 5 p, and 6 p.m., apparently. Well, it was 8.37 now and there was no sign of him. Stevens gave the bell a further ring and drummed his fingers on the frosted glass of the porch window. He turned at the sound of a car drawing up outside. A small woman wearing a brown cardigan over a blue uniform got out of the car and came into the porch.

'Hello, is the door not open?' she asked.

'No, I'm looking for Mr Taylor.'

'Well, just hold on, I've got the key in here somewhere.' She rooted through her bag and eventually produced a Yale key. She unlocked the door and held it open for him to follow her through. The waiting room was dominated by dark wooden walls though the sun shone brightly through windows looking on to the garden outside. An alcove in one wall was cut off from the rest of the room by a desk which carried a cash register and stacks of colourful leaflets.

‘Stuart's usually here before me. He has surgery at half past eight, you see. But sometimes he has to go out urgently to farms. He’ll have left a message for me.' She went through a door and emerged behind the reception desk. 'What can I do for you?’

‘I’m a police officer. Inspector Stevens.' He showed her his ID. 'I just wanted a word with Mr Taylor.'

‘There's nothing wrong is there? I’ll just see where he is.’ She rummaged through pieces of paper on a cabinet behind the desk.

‘No, nothing wrong. He phoned me last night and left an interesting message. I'm just following it up.’

‘Oh, well, he doesn't appear to have left a note for me. Maybe he’s still at home.' She picked up the phone, pressed a couple of buttons and then waited. Stevens could just hear the ringing, but there was no reply. She dropped the phone on to the hook disappointedly.’

‘No luck?' he asked.

‘No, I can't think where he can be. It's not like him to go without leaving any message for me.’

‘Well, I'll come back later.' Stevens moistened his lips. ‘I don’t suppose you could tell me the address of any, er, stables that he

visited yesterday? He might have mentioned it to you?'

'No, he didn't say anything.' She looked uncertain. 'I'm not sure whether I ought ... but you are police, of course. I don't suppose it can do any harm.' She took a green book from under the desk and flipped through the pages. 'Ah, Tremayne's, over at Llanfer.'

'That'll be the one. Can you show me where it is?'

'Yes, just come with me.' She came out through the door and led him into a tiny office where a map of the area hung on one wall alongside a large noticeboard. She pointed out the stable on the map.

'Well, thanks very much,' he said. 'You've been very helpful. Please tell Mr Taylor that I called and I'll probably come back again later.' He went to the door and stepped out on to the porch. He turned and looked at her standing uncertainly in the middle of the waiting room. 'Goodbye,' he said and let the door swing shut.

Back in his car, he took a look at his watch and decided that it was time to go over and see the policeman in Llanfer Ceiriog. Hughes, the man's name was. He'd tried to contact him the night before to see if he could follow up the identities of some of the people involved in the coach crash, but to no avail.

Hughes hadn't been by his phone then, but surely a village policeman would still be abed at this time in the morning?

It took twenty minutes to drive to Llanfer and in that time the bright morning sunshine was dissipated by a thin cloud cover. The policeman lived on the far side of the village and Stevens noticed the track up to the stables leading off the road as he passed. It turned out that the policeman's house was a small cottage overlooking the road, its whitewashed walls a dull grey colour from years of weathering. An old bike leant against the wall by the door, its handlebars tangled up amongst a sheet of ivy that clung precariously to any available nooks and crannies.

Stevens drove on to the grass verge and walked up the small set of stone steps that led to the front door of the cottage. He knocked briskly on the flakily painted door. A few seconds elapsed before it swung open, accompanied by the smell of frying.

'Hello?' The man was tall and broad-shouldered. His greying hair was swept untidily to one side and stubble speckled his chin. His eyes were bleary.

'Constable Hughes?'

'That's right, boyo.'

Stevens took his ID from his breast pocket and showed Hughes. 'Inspector Stevens from the Yard, can I come in?'

Hughes hesitated uncertainly but eventually capitulated. 'Ah, come on in. Just having me breakfast, you know.'

Stevens was led into a small kitchen, its tiled walls stained with the

signs of frying explosions. A pan simmered on a ring in the corner.

'Take a seat, why don't you?' Hughes suggested. He turned to the blue formica-covered work surface.

'So what's this all about?'

'You heard about the big coach accident yesterday morning?' A mug was deposited in front of him.

'Cup of tea, isn't it? Yes, I heard about it. Nasty, I believe.'

'Very nasty, no survivors. The thing is the only one we've been able to identify is the driver. He came from Llanfer Ceiriog.'

'That so? What was he called?'

'Hughes, like you, Selwyn Hughes. Know him?'

'Selwyn. No, doesn't ring a bell. How did you identify him? Driving licence, was it?'

'That's right.'

'Ah, well, he may have lived here a few years ago then. Come think of it, I do recall a Selwyn being in the pub sometimes. But not recently. Sorry.'

'You're sure? I've got the address somewhere. And these photos of the casualties.' Stevens handed over a sheaf of pictures and Hughes started to leaf through them. He shook his head. 'No, nothing I recognize.'

'The thing is the coach is registered as being owned by a Mr Emrys Hughes - you Hugheses get around a lot, don't you? - who lives at a place called Dinorben in Llanfer Ceiriog.'

'Emrys owned the coach, did he? Well, there you go. Selwyn was probably a relative that Emrys was helping to set up in business. Emrys'd do things like that. As far as I know though, Emrys isn't around at the moment so there's not much point in going up to Dinorben.'

'Ah, right. Well, er, you've been very helpful.' Stevens stood up and picked up the photographs. 'I'll probably get in touch with you again. I'll be staying around here, trying to track down any of these faces.

Thanks for the tea. Enjoy your breakfast. I'll myself out.'

He stood outside the front door, thinking. He couldn't be sure, but when he'd first arrived, Hughes had seemed definitely uneasy about something. And then that clumsy attempt to persuade him not to go and see this Emrys. Something was going on here.

He walked down and got into his car, turning it in the road. There were certainly enquiries to be pursued here. But first to see about this unicorn at the stables.

Hugh woke and felt Janet's warmth in the bed beside him. So who was it cooking bacon downstairs? He eased himself out from between the sheets and slipped on his dressing gown. Opening the bedroom

door quietly, he paid a quick visit to the bathroom and then went down to the kitchen.

'Morning, Hugh,' the Doctor said cheerily. 'A good night's sleep I hope?'

'Yes, thanks. You're up early.'

'Time is relative,' the Doctor told him. I've been up all night. '

'Ah,' Hugh nodded, 'so it was you we heard playing rock and roll on the record player at two this morning?'

'At two?' the Doctor asked, surprised. 'Oh dear, I think I'd better have a word with Ace about these antisocial behaviour patterns. I went out at twelve to track the spoor of our visitor.'

'That was a bit dangerous, wasn't it?'

'I don't think so. No, not really.' The Doctor looked out of the window at the lush, green hillside, the dewed grass glimmering in the sunlight. 'Anyway, at two I was stargazing up in the hills.' His eyes gleamed and Hugh found himself looking into eternity within their dark orbits. 'The sky was beautifully clear; the Milky Way a bold stroke of the creator's spray-can across the heavens; there was a meteor shower from the direction of Aquarius; the music of the spheres was being played by a full orchestra.'

'A good night then?'

'The best.' The Doctor returned his attention to the frying pan. 'Eggs, bacon, tomato and fried bread be enough for you? I've just put the kettle on.'

'I think that should be just about adequate.'

'Ready in a few minutes then.'

'Right, I'll go and rouse Janet.' Hugh disappeared through the kitchen door.

'Wicked smell, Professor,' Ace announced herself. 'What's cookin', Doc?'

'Ace, I hear you've been boogieing the night away.'

'Oh yeah. I just had a look at their record collection. There's some groovy stuff there, you know. Bill Haley, Eddie Cochran, Buddy Holly. They've even got some Cliff - I never really believed he was around back in those days.'

'There are those of us who bear our accumulated years quite well Doctor told her. 'But really, Ace, you shouldn't play records in other people's houses when they re trying to sleep.

'Right-o, Professor, I'll bear that in mind. Those eggs look good enough to eat.'

The Doctor took a look. 'Ah yes, pass me a few plates quickly.' He dished out portions on to two plates. 'Go and give Janet and Hugh a shout, Ace. Oh, needn't bother, I hear them descending even as we

speak.'

Hugh and Janet came in, still wearing their nightclothes,

'This is quite a treat,' Janet said, sitting down at the table.

'Breakfast is served,' Ace proclaimed, setting a plate in front of Hugh with a flourish. 'I used to be a waitress, you know, she confided.

'Yes, I believe you were fired, weren't you?' the Doctor commented.

'Nobody's perfect, Professor. There you are, Janet.'

'Thank you, dear.'

'Hey, Professor,' Ace complained, 'you haven t done any for us.

'You noticed that did you, Ace? I didn't think you'd need any after your midnight visit to the fridge.'

Ace protested, 'It was just a snack, Professor.'

'We'll have an early start, Ace.' He picked up his hat from the table and set it upon his head. 'You can have something when we get back from looking round Emrys Hughes's land. With any luck he'll still be eating his breakfast too.'

Ace gave a loud whoop as she ran down the slope from the ridge that separated the two valleys. As she neared the bottom her momentum became too much for her and the weight of .her rucksack sent her tumbling head over heels, leaving her in a crumpled heap at the foot of the hill. The Doctor followed more sedately, but Ace was still cursing to herself when he reached her and helped her to her feet.

'There are some ways of descending hills that are more decorous for a young lady than others, my dear Ace,' he told her, flicking a few pieces of wet grass from her black jacket.

'I bet they're all boring though, aren't they?' Ace retorted, her enthusiasm for speed over stateliness undiminished,

'You could be right. Now then, the village is this way, am I right?'

Ace pulled a face. 'The trees all look the same to me.'

'Nonsense, Ace. The oak is a world apart from the slender birch, the manic-depressive willow and the witch's bane, the trusty rowan. I shall lead on, from the front as it were.' He moved off into the green-shaded underworld looking about carefully, in no way eager to encounter Emrys and his rifle. 'My unerring sense of direction will lead us directly to Dinorben, ancient home of farmers bearing the red rose.' He turned and gave Ace a hard stare in return for the derisive laugh she had offered him. She smiled innocently and waved him on.

The first indication that the village had been reached was a large stone with a velvety covering of moss that lay embedded in the soft earth. The Doctor knelt by it momentarily and then moved to a further pile of stones a few metres on. Ace paused by the first stone and, digging her fingers under it levered it out of its indentation. A worm glared at her and then proceeded about its business. She flipped the

rock back into place and then went over to the Doctor.

'Definitely part of a building,' he said. 'And there are quite a lot of these lying around?'

'Yes, all over the place. There's a well somewhere'

'Shall we go and have a look?'

'Yeah, come on. I think it's over here.'

Ace led him through the trees towards the well. Before they reached it, however, they intercepted the track to the stone circle.

'Look, Ace.' The Doctor pointed at the churned mud of the track.

'Tyreprints! They weren't there yesterday.'

'And what about all the footprints, were they?'

Ace looked closely. The tyremarks overlaid a great many footprints. 'There were some.'

'Do you notice anything about them?'

Ace peered at them, wondering what the Doctor could be trying to make her see. She bit her lower lip and shook her head. But then she had an idea. 'The tyremarks are over the footprints so they must have been made after them. '

‘Yes. Anything else?'

‘There's only one set of tyremarks. They re only going one way.’

‘Is there a through road?'

‘Dunno.’

.’Well, is there anything else you notice?'

‘Not really, no.'

‘All of the shoes of these people who trampled around here were cobbled. Look, you can tell from the imprints. They've got primitive grips on the soles and on some of them you can see where the nails were sticking out. Now even in this part of the world I'd expect someone who was coming out for a jolly night in the woodlands to wear something more like a pair of Wellingtons.'

‘Oh yeah. So what?'

‘I just thought I'd mention it. You never can tell when such information might come in useful. Now where’s this well.’

‘Over here.' Ace took the Doctor into the trees on the other side of the track and led him to where the remains of the well lay. Doctor looked at it with interest.

‘Well, well, well.'

‘Three holes in the ground,' said Ace.

‘What?'

‘Nothing, what do you think?'

'I’m surprised that in more than a century its walls haven’t collapsed.' He looked up. 'Nothing more to be seen here. Let’s go and take a look at the circle of stones.'

They went back to the track and followed it to its conclusion at the small circle of low granite slabs.

The Doctor considered the stones one by one and then spoke his thoughts to Ace.

‘Interesting. What appear to be the key stones are situated in entirely the wrong places, when one takes into account the local geography. Here's another test of observation for you, Ace. Go and see if you can find a third stone as large as these two on either side of the circle. If there is one it'll probably be a few metres away from the outside of the ring.'

‘Look, Professor, the tyremarks stop here. They just vanish.'

‘Strange, though I believe there may be a perfectly good explanation.’

'Well, what is it?'

‘You go and look for that stone, Ace. I'll tell you when I’m certain and not before.’

'Like you always do.'

‘Go on, Ace.'

She nodded and stalked off. The Doctor wandered round the edge of the circle until he was by one of the two large stones which stood on opposite sides, facing each other. He knelt down by it and examined it closely. After a couple of seconds he stood up, removed his hat and balanced it on top of the adjacent stone. He crouched down by the stone again and looked at it at close range. It was covered on one side by moss that had crept up in a mat from the ground, and on the other side by explosions of lichen, yellow, green and brown. From his pocket he took a small knife and clicked it open. He scratched at the surface covering and sniffed at the fragments of plant material that fell into his hand Then, methodically, he started to remove the lichen from a large area of the surface. Finally, satisfied with his work, he sat back and gazed at the exposed area.

Gradually, as though the sunlight falling on the bare rock was the cause, small, moving flashes of light on the rock became apparent. But were they on the surface of the rock? Was it merely a strange optical effect that made them appear as though they were buried deep within its heart, following stress lines within the silicon itself? One flash in particular drew the Doctor's attention It sped across the rock and, like an electron passing through a cloud chamber, it left a track behind itself which slowly faded.

And just when the pathway had almost gone, the flash repeated itself. The Doctor extended his forefinger and ran it along the abrasive surface, pressing it so that small particles of his skin were left behind. He pulled his finger away, waiting until just before the flash was about to appear and then with reflexes timed to the millisecond he

pressed his finger in the path of the flash. And when it hit, it was diverted, sparking off along a new trajectory, setting off bright new flashes as it went. Behind him, the Doctor felt a shifting in the air. He took his finger away and allowed the flash to resume its former pathway; the disturbance behind him halted. That was the confirmation he needed; further affirmation could be dangerous to acquire and the TARDIS's tracking systems, providing they were operational, could be used to get the information he needed with greater reliability and safety.

A feeling of excitement touched the Doctor's thoughts. He had here a device which, if it could be linked into the TARDIS's circuits could restore the ailing link with the Eye of Harmony on Gallifrey.

There was the problem of finding an adequately sensitive organic matrix to provide the connection which could regenerate the block transfer circuit, but here at least was a partial solution to the TARDIS's problems.

He stood up from his work and turned to survey the circle.

'Ace!' he called.

'Yes.' Her voice was muffled by the intervening foliage and came from beyond the far edge of the circle.

'Come here, Ace, I've got something to show you,' he shouted to her.

'Oh, right, coming!' she replied. He heard her making her way towards him and eventually she appeared from amongst the trees.

'I couldn't find another stone,' she said.

'No, I didn't think you would.'

'Then why did you ... never mind. What did you want to show me?'

'This.' He gestured towards the stone.

She started across the clearing to look. 'Oh yeah, what is it?'

'What we have here is a semiorganic silicate computer transfer device that has ... no, Ace, don't go through the centre ... '

The air stirred briefly. In the woods a branch fell from a tree, but there was no one there to hear it.

Old Davy paused, one leg over the stile. He cocked his head to one side. His eyes eased shut and he took a suck on his upper lip. Slowly his head began to nod as ancient motors in his mind connected thoughts together.

Suddenly he completed the movement over the stile and continued his journey down towards his regular appointment with the bench outside the pub. He knew what he had heard - gossamer touch of a butterfly's wings crashing together and silenced in a moment.

4:
Arawn's Wheel

She was falling into darkness, and her very being became as one with the night. Her memories blurred, streaked across the canvas of infinity. Her soul was torn apart but she could not voice her pain or anguish for she was without substance. And then, out of the darkness a light like the end of a tunnel hurtled towards her and ripped through her, dissembling her identity as it passed. For an instant she felt a dichotomy - as though her spirit had been split between twins - and the moment was over. Finally, when she could take no more, random scatterings of energy were converted into mass and she found herself within the circle ... only it wasn't the same.

The diffuse grey sunlight of the Welsh summer had gone, replaced by a hellish glow emanating from the baleful red orb that hung malignantly in the dark, crimson-streaked sky. In the dim illumination it seemed to her that the contours of the valley were unchanged, but the trees which had filled it had squatted lower and sprouted canvas overhangs. And no longer was the valley a place of solitude, for at the very edge of the circle, their hands nervously clutching weapons directed at her, were a crowd of men. They wore tabards, apparently made from rough sacking and secured by thick leather belts around their waists. Their faces, yellow and stained and bearing all the signs of malnutrition, were clouded with fear and trepidation at the sight of this newcomer.

There was a movement in the air beside her and a hand clutched her arm tightly.

'- of the circle,' the Doctor finished, somewhat lamely. He shook his head as if to determine that everything was still in place. 'Oh dear, what an unpleasant way to travel. An unstable low-capacity system,' he muttered to himself.

'Come out of the circle, strangers.' One of the men, looking in better health than the others and had an intricate design woven in the shoulder of his garment had stepped forward. He was obviously the leader of the men around the circle and he emphasized his position of power by waving a loaded crossbow at them.

‘Are you alright, Ace? Everything as it should be?' the Doctor asked.

‘Oh fine,’ she replied. 'Why go to all the effort of getting drunk to get a hangover when I can feel this good just by wandering into Stonehenge.’

‘You’re all right' the Doctor grinned.

‘Come out of the circle, strangers,’ the man repeated his command. ‘I will not tell you a third time.’

The Doctor supported Ace as they walked towards him and made as if to doff his hat. When he realized that he had left it perched atop the stone he offered his hand in greeting instead.

‘I’m the Doctor – and this is my friend, Ace.’

‘Hi’

There was no response, and once they were out of the circle they were grabbed roughly. The leader took Ace by the shoulders.

‘Oi! Watch it!’ she shouted, struggling wildly.

‘Do you mind?’ the Doctor asked, as his arm was painfully yanked up behind his back.

‘Hold her still,’ the leader commanded and Ace’s cheeks were clamped between two heavily callused hands.

‘Geroff!’

He pulled Ace’s hair to one side and peered closely at her neck, bringing a flaming brand up to it so that he could see better. He gave a snort and let her go.

‘She’s free o the mark,’ he said.

‘So’s he.’

‘Well, strangers, welcome to Tír na n-Óg. Welcome to Dinorben. I am Captain Rhys of the Guard. I apologize for my heavy-handedness, but there are unusual times and naturally we fear contamination.

Now you will come with me. I must take you to be judged by the Tuatha.’

'Judged?' asked the Doctor quietly. ‘What have we done?’

‘You have come through the gateway,' Rhys answered, 'and your fate is uncertain. Come with me.'

'Professor,' Ace muttered angrily, 'I don't like this. What did he mean by "contamination"?' To her the word had unpleasant undertones - her mind fled back to a handsome young sergeant in 1963 who had wanted to keep the outsiders out.

'I don't know, Ace. But one thing's certain, they aren't going to let us back the way we came.' He pointed back to the circle where the men had formed into a double ring, facing both towards the centre of the circle, and away from it. 'I wonder what they're guarding it against?'

Rhys was becoming impatient and signalled for two men to start shepherding the Doctor and Ace along with him. With the stimulus of a sword against their backs, they acquiesced readily and he led them through the tents towards the entrance of the valley. It was only now that the smell hit Ace's nostrils.

'Oh, yuk! What's that?' She screwed up her face and pressed the back of her hand over her nose and mouth. 'Whiffy!' she exclaimed.

'No sewers,' the Doctor told her. 'Look around you. There must be a couple of thousand people here.

That's a lot for one small valley. It's bound to create some smell.'

Ace coughed and felt the bile rising in her throat. 'How can they

stand it?'

'The human being is one of the most adaptable organisms in the universe. That s one of the reasons why the species is so successful. Other species have to bend their environment to fit a preordained need.

Humans just do it because they can.

So how can they stand it?'

The Doctor shrugged. 'They get used to it after a while. Gallifreyans developed a respiratory bypass system which could miss out the olfactory organs. Your method is simpler.'

They went on in silence. Ace looked closely around her. As they passed, faces, grime-streaked and gaunt, peered out from behind tent-flaps, silently drawn aside. Each face was different, but they all bore a common look that haunted their hollow eyes. It was a look that she recognized, the look of the hunted, and it was a look which stirred strange feelings in her because of her experience as one of the hunters on the planet of the Cheetah people. But a closer examination revealed something more, something beyond them being mere quarry.

The hunted lacked hope but had a fierce air about them, for their predator was close on their heels.

But these people, whilst they were indubitably fugitives, had a pathetically hopeful look which suggested that they thought they had somewhere to run to. The people here weren't cornered prey - the ferret facing a dog could at least turn and fight to the death, even though it had no hope of surviving.

These people had been given a ray of hope which they clung to tenaciously, even as it slipped through their fingers.

The tents ended where the ground began to rise to the edges of the valleys and Ace, her eyes becoming acclimatized to the dim light, could see that at regular points along the valley top were squat towers, silhouetted in black against the sky. Between these towers marched small patrols. Ace wondered, as the Doctor had, what they were guarding against.

But now she turned her eyes to the front and saw where they were being taken. Across what had been the open end of the valley was an enormous wall built out of huge blocks of stone. Here and there on this vast edifice there twinkled points of firelight, framed by small rectangles of dim orange light. The pale red sun low in the west, gave depth and shadow to the wall. In its centre was a large opening, a deep set hole in the wall. Far into the wall and half shrouded in darkness was a mighty wooden door.

The length of the tunnel which led to this door was such that Ace could only believe that the wall must be over a hundred feet thick.

‘What is this place?' she asked the Doctor.

‘You heard Captain Rhys. This is Tír na n-Óg, which, unless I’m very much mistaken in my memory of your ancient mythologies, was the kingdom where the Celts retired to when they died.'

Ace looked around her at this stinking, muddy, hellish world of faerie and rejected the idea. 'But, Professor,' she whispered, that’s just mythology. Where is this really? Where on Earth are we? Have we gone back in time?'

The Doctor raised an eyebrow at this. 'Just mythology is it, Ace? Again, if my memory serves me right, King Arthur was just mythology.' He became serious. 'I don't know where we are exactly, Ace, but we are a long way from Earth. Look up at the stars.'

Ace did as she was told. The sky wasn't like Earth's where, during the day, the glare of the sun drowned the distant and relatively dim stars. The low level of light from the red sun allowed the stars to shine through the haze. Ace had once stood on a street corner in Perivale, while her friends took drags on cigarettes, and peered upwards; the night sky was filled with an orange haze from the omnipresent street lamps and looked not unlike the sky of Tír na n-Óg.

'Recognize anything?' the Doctor asked her.

She had only ever been able to distinguished the Plough, Cassiopeia and Orion's Belt, and so these were her only reference points. But she searched for them in vain.

'It's all different,' she said.

'Exactly. We're a long way from anywhere. On the outskirts of a galaxy I should say. But which galaxy?' He shook his head.

'Professor, look,' Ace whispered urgently. She pointed to a fire smouldering at the foot of the towering wall. It burnt around the base of a tall stone post and on it were obviously human remains which twitched horribly.

'Oh dear,' said the Doctor, 'we seem to have stumbled upon a rather barbaric culture.'

'Get moving, you two,' Captain Rhys called and Ace realized that she and the Doctor had stopped moving at the sight of the burning. The Captain followed their gazes and saw what they were looking at.

'Spare no sympathy for those creatures. They were witches, they deserved to die.'

'Nobody deserves to die, Captain Rhys,’ the Doctor said, his dark eyes burning from within their hooded sockets. 'Try to ignore it, Ace.' He turned to her and saw that her eyes were firmly shut and her fists clenched: He reached out a hand to her but left it hovering just over her shoulder. 'Ace?'

Finally she looked at him. 'What sort of a scumbag could do that?' she asked. 'Burn somebody alive?'

The Doctor allowed his hand to settle on her and turned her round so that she fully faced him, so that she couldn't see the fire. 'It's a different world, Ace,' he told her gently. The sky, a simmering, angry red, was filled with dense clouds like clenched fists. From the tents, eyes bulged in their sockets from faces that were stretched and drawn from prolonged misery. The fortress of Dinorben, its walls pocked intermittently by blazing coals and night-filled craters, loomed over them oppressively. 'It isn't the same,'

he said.

'They're human, aren't they?' Ace said angrily, her eyes ablaze. Whatever they were seeing now, it certainly wasn't the ramshackle tents and churned mud of Dinorben. More likely it was the flat erupting in petrol-inspired flames and Manisha's accusing eyes clamped within the burgeoning scar tissue.

The two guards moved forward and gave Ace a push to start her moving again. She turned and glared, but her feet carried her onwards, towards the tunnel through the wall.

The entrance to the tunnel was twenty-five feet wide and twice as tall, but as the passage penetrated the wall it grew narrower and lower so that by the time the gate was reached it was only half that size.

On either side of the entrance, two staircases ran upwards to small doors set high in the wall.

Captain Rhys led them up the left-hand set of stairs. As he climbed, the Doctor looked down on the mud. He gave Ace a nudge and drew her attention to it. She gazed blankly down and then her open face registered acknowledgement.

'Tyremarks. I think I can guess your perfectly simple explanation now.'

The Doctor merely nodded and carried on upwards. When they reached the door, Captain Rhys signalled for it to be opened by slamming the butt of his crossbow against its solid oak three times. It swung open rapidly and shut. as fast once they were through. A short passageway, lit by dimly flickering torches, led from the door into a vast hall which Ace felt sure must have spammed the width of the entire wall. Long trestle tables stained with the fat and wine of a thousand meals filled the hall and in a deep pit at one end a bonfire burnt fitfully, releasing a cloud of smoke particles. Over the years the fire had coloured the rock of the hall a greasy black.

Rhys strode into the centre of the hall and filled his lungs to shout, 'Caeryon! Caeryon! Where are you, you damned fool of a grass snake?'

A wooden panel high up in the wall over the pit clattered open and a small dark head poked out from behind it. Wisps of black hair fell

untidily across the face and danced impatiently when the person spoke.

'What do you want, Captain?'

'Are the Tuatha still within the chamber?'

'Yeth, of courthe they are, Captain.' His eyes settled on Ace and the Doctor. 'Ah, have we then thome vithitorth? Well, bring them up, bring them up.'

Ace whispered to the Doctor, 'Love that lithp.'

'We all have our crosses to bear,' he reproached her.

The panel slammed back into place and in the wall far beneath it a pivoted stone swung open, revealing a set of stairs. Rhys beckoned to the Doctor and Ace to follow and tersely commanded the two guards to return to the circle.

Once on the stairs the stone entrance shut smoothly behind them. A feeling of panic briefly caught Ace's *mind* as, like a wild animal trapped, she found the stone walls closing in around her oppressively.

She reached out an arm to the Doctor for reassurance.

'Professor? '

'Yes, Ace?'

The feeling passed. 'It's nothing, I … Nothing.'

The Doctor moved her so that she was in front of him and they started up the spiralling ascent.

Torches hung on the walls at regular intervals and filled the air with oily fumes that clung pervasively to everything. Shortly they heard footsteps descending and druidic robes, followed by the head of Caeryon came into view.

'Come along, come along. We muthn't keep the Tuatha waiting,' he told them. And slipping nimbly round the stair's axis, he dropped on to the step behind the Doctor and gave him a push.

'All things come to those who wait,' the Doctor advised him.

'Just watch who you're pushing, ratface,' Ace contributed belligerently.

Taken aback, Caeryon blinked and then asked, 'And who exactly am I pushing, Captain Rhyth?'

'This is the Doctor and –'

'I'm his friend, Ace,' she finished.

'Pleased to meet you,' the Doctor said. 'You're some sort of priest I take it?'

'Thome thort of prietht?' Caeryon spluttered. 'I am not jutht thome thort of prietht,' he raised himself to his full five feet two inches, 'I am the higheth ranking druid in Tír na n-Óg.' He sagged and muttered to himself, 'Much good that it doeth me. I am the landth firtht conthort, reduthed to running errandth for the Tuatha de Danaan.' For a moment he contemplated the wall as if it were some terribly

appealing but sad creature and then he slapped his forehead. 'What are you letting me do, Rhyth? Come along, come along, no *time* to be maudlin. They wait impatiently.'

It was a magnificent chair, carved from the same rock as the walls of the chamber around it. Twisting and writhing about its surface was a multitude of creatures. At one time they had been further ornamented by gold serpents which coiled round the legs of the menagerie, but now, of course, all gold was gone from the council chamber.

Dryfid leader of the Tuatha de Danaan, ruling elite of Tír na n-Óg, sat in the highly ornate chair, and gazed levelly at General Nuada on the far side of the circular, thick wooden table. Nuada, the fingers of one hand silently drumming on the oak wood listened intently to Sister Keli and so was unaware that he was the object of Dryfid's attention. Even had he known, it was unlikely that he would have cared, so sure was he of himself.

Dryfid's hand strayed from the head of the spitting dragon which formed one armrest of his chair down to scratch between the ears of the wolf sitting on its haunches at his side. Through all the uncertainty and changes, Cyllell had remained resolutely faithful, unwavering in his devotion. It was a quality that Dryfid would have liked to have seen in his fellow members of the Tuathu. It was true that, while some whom he had considered allies now sided with Nuada, there were others who, unexpectedly, took his point of view, though probably for completely different reasons to his own. But of these, there were not enough, not nearly enough. Sister Keli, for example, was the prime mover behind many of the cults, the most important of which was, of course, the cult of Dagda. She counselled the Tuatha to remain and face the consequences of everything that had happened and she despised Dryfid for his weakness. Dryfid realized that Sister Keli was constantly comparing him to his esteemed predecessor, Dagda, but all the same it was disheartening to have all that scorn poured upon him. Sister Keli was nearing the end of her tirade now and Dryfid finally began to listen to her droning voice.

'And so the first stage of this great plan of yours has failed. What do we do now? I have stated my opinion. If we delay too long and do not change our ways then we shall surely be overrun and it will be by Dagda's will.'

Nuada rose from his seat, twisting his heavy frame as he did so in order to face the Sister. His head was covered by a thick mane of dark brown hair and in the profile which this position afforded Dryfid, his craggy broken nose was most prominent, replacing the livid scar across his forehead as his most notable feature. He grinned at Sister

Keli's sour face and offered a slight bow, at most an inclination of the head, in her direction.

'Sister, much though we appreciate your ... uh, that is, Dagda' s point of view, at present there is no danger. Only this morning I received word from Chulainn of the Clyr that the demons had not advanced beyond his furthest outposts which means that it will probably be weeks before they even approach Dinorben. They will ravage the Fomoir and Sidhe settlements before their hunger draws them here.'

Dryfid interrupted him. 'General, that is hardly an admirable attitude to take. The Fomoir and the Sidhe were our friends, our allies for centuries. We should be sending help to them.'

'Need I point out that their armies batter at our gates even now? This is not the action of a friend.'

'We have blocked them from a chance of salvation that we have kept for ourselves alone. We have not behaved in a friendly fashion either,' Dryfid reminded him.

Barras of Teirion rose to his feet, his lip curled into a sneer. 'They have never been our friends. When we first arrived they fought us and the battle lasted for a millennium. They are the traitor Goibhnie's servants. They do his bidding and seek, as they always have, to destroy us. In recent years their plans have merely been more covert, but now they reveal their true colours.'

Barras;' Dryfid said, shaking his head, 'your long feud with the Firbolg over the farm lands in the mountains is well, known. Do not let it cloud your judgement of this situation.'

'If I may continue?' Nuada asked. 'I was answering Sister Keli's objections. There is no present danger, for we still have plentiful supplies of gold and Emrys will quickly be able to accomplish his side of the operation. Before the demons can reach us we will be through the circle and have destroyed it.'

His eyes ran round the faces of the entire Tuatha. 'The evacuation will proceed as planned, and it shall proceed exactly as the Tuatha itself agreed it should proceed.'

'Not a unanimous decision,' Dryfid murmured. 'Certainly not the route I have advised, as you all know.'

'The majority agreed, and I am merely carrying out their wishes.'

'The majority are fools,' said Keli bitterly, 'you all are. I refuse to associate myself with this ridiculous scheme. I shall return to the Marches and await your destruction. Dagda shall protect me.' She pushed her chair back from the table and rose.

'Shall I provide an escort, Sister Keli?' Nuada asked. 'Just in case Dagda really has deserted us?'

‘You utter fool,' Keli spat and strode round the perimeter of the room to the double doors. As she reached out to open them, they were pulled open from without and Caeryon entered.

'Thithter,' he greeted her, 'I bring thtrangerth to ... '

'What?' she asked harshly.

'I thaid that I bring thtra ... '

She gave an exasperated exclamation and pushed past him.

'Well, I . . . ' began Caeryon.

'What do you want, Caeryon?' asked Dryfid wearily. His fingers idly ran round Cyllell's ears in a double loop, ruffling the hair slightly.

‘All yeth.' Caeryon ushered Rhys, a young girl with a pack on her back and a small dark-eyed man into the room. 'More people from the other world have come thr ... '

‘And that's not all, sir,' Rhys broke in. Immediately prior to the arrival of these two, two of General Nuada' s guard passed through the circle.'

'Two passed through the circle? Why? Surely none of Nuada’s men could have been witches?'

'Impossible!' bellowed Nuada, angrily.

'If not then I cannot explain the incident. Almost as soon as they had gone, these two arrived.'

'Will you please stop interrupting me?' squawked Caeryon his lisp momentarily overridden by his irritation.

Dryfid raised an eyebrow. 'Have you anything to add, Caeryon?'

'Well, no. But I am the High Druid. I detherve a little rethpect, surely?'

'Get out of here, Caeryon,' Nuada cried, 'you self-important little ...’

Caeryon's eyes widened and from his throat there began to issue forth strangulated gurglings. His face flushed a mottled purple and red.

'You are dismissed, Caeryon, Attend to your duties' Dryfid told him.

'Nice people these, Professor,' Ace commented.

‘Yes,' the Doctor agreed and, taking her hand, he pushed aside Caeryon and Rhys to address the Tuatha de Danaan. 'If I might interrupt your internal squabbles.' He jumped lightly on to the table. 'I'm the Doctor and,' with a strength belied by his size he pulled Ace up beside him, 'this is my friend, Ace.’

‘Just what do you think you're doing?' Nuada shouted.

The Doctor's face crinkled into a broad smile. 'Sit down Ace,' he said, directing her to Sister Keli's vacant chair. She dropped from the table and arranged herself comfortably in the hard wooden seat. She swung her legs up and planted her trainers firmly on the tabletop. 'Just trying to clarify a few things, the Doctor answered Nuada's

question. 'For a start what is this place and why have we been brought here?'

Dryfid rose. 'If you would remove yourself from our council table then I might perhaps answer you.'

He gestured downwards with a wave of his arm.

'Ah well,' the Doctor sighed, 'anything to make life easier.' He sprang down to the flagged floor and then leant on the back of Ace's chair, cradling his chin on his crossed forearms.

Dryfid stepped forwards from his menagerie of a throne and spoke to the other members of the Tuatha. 'I think I shall handle this matter alone and so I officially end this meeting of the Tuatha de Danaan.'

One by one they filed out of the room until only Captain Rhys, General Nuada, Ace and the Doctor were left with him.

'Nuada?'

'I think I should be present. The security of the circle rests with me.'

'Nonsense, Nuada. You may go.'

General Nuada seemed to be about to say something but finally he turned on his heel and left. The doors slammed shut behind him.

Dryfid's old eyes swivelled to rest on Captain Rhys. 'Captain, would you wait here a few moments while I talk with our guests?' Rhys nodded curtly and then Dryfid turned to smile at the two travellers.

'Doctor ... urn, Ace, if you would follow me.'

As Dryfid led them through a door at the back of the chamber, Cyllell rose and padded softly behind Ace and the Doctor. The room they entered was small and lit only by the embers of a dying fire. He motioned for them to sit in the cushion-padded, high-backed chairs as he restocked the fire with split logs. Ace slipped free of her rucksack and balanced it against the wall before she sat down. She brushed her long hair over her shoulder as she watched the old man by the fire. His earthy-coloured robes swept the floor, dangerously close to the glowing ashes, as he moved wood on to the hearth.

After a few jabs with a poker the logs began to burn, and Dryfid too lowered himself into one of the chairs. Cyllell settled down to bask in the warmth of the fire. As Ace looked down at the thick fur on the back of the wolf she noticed for the first time how cold this whole place was. She shivered and dug herself into the deep padding of the chair. She looked at the old man's face. He seemed to be thinking and it was some time before he spoke. Finally, when his soft rhythmic breathing had seemed to become one with the silence of the room, he began to speak.

'No doubt you are confused and maybe even frightened by all that has happened to you,' he said. Ace was about to interrupt to contradict

him but the Doctor waved her into silence. 'You have been carried from your home - your Earth - to this strange place called Dinorben in the land of Tír na n-Óg. I can offer you few comforting thoughts at this time. I am afraid that we cannot allow you to return lest you should reveal our presence to the people of Earth. I am told, by Emrys and Nuada that you vastly outnumber us. The figure was one beyond an old mind's comprehension.

'This country must seem a terrifying place, with its dark red skies and Arawn' s Wheel in the ascendancy, but it was not always like this. His eyes were unfocused, drifting back in time to an age when the sun warmed the green, rolling hills and the expansive oak woodlands where man and beast lived in harmony, living in a good-natured symbiosis with the beautiful land.

'What's Arawn's Wheel?' asked Ace.

Dryfid recalled his mind from his wanderings. It pained him to do so, for when he let his thoughts roam, he was almost back there with Wynne in their cottage on the outskirts of the Sidhe forest. Her death, late one night, had finally brought him to Dinorben to do his duty. Her death, lit by the foul light of Arawn's Wheel. 'Ah, a foolish name for the red sun used by superstitious peasants and more educated people like myself when the fear and oppression get to be too much. They used to say that Arawn and Dagda chased across the sky in fiery chariots and once every fifteen days Dagda would obliterate his ancient enemy, only for him to be reborn from Dagda's flesh.' A look of confusion crossed his face.

'Where was I?'

'It wasn't always like this,' prompted the Doctor, again hushing Ace.

'Indeed. It used to be so different, such a wonderful place. Full of joy and life and richness.' A trickle of a tear inched its way down his cheek, catching the orange firelight, until it mingled with the grey hairs of his beard. Every day he shed a tear for Wynne and her lost chances, their lost chances. He turned his head towards the fire to hide his expression, but Ace could hear the sadness in his voice. The Doctor leaned forward in his chair to listen.

'I worked so hard, when the sky was blue. Worked for peace, worked for cooperation. I had to, that was all there was for me. And then one morning it was all destroyed. It had all been for nothing. With a single blow our lives were transformed to the mean, miserable, pointless existence that we lead now. All taken away as easily as you take a toy from an errant child.

'One morning the sun didn't rise, however much we prayed, or wished, or weeped, or hoped. It was as though we had fallen from grace.

‘There was a man, a man called Goibhnie. He was wise beyond worlds and had helped us through adversity before. In our foolishness we thought that he would help us now. The Tuatha sent an emissary to Goibhnie. He did not return. There were those who claimed that the Fomoir, or the Firbolg, or the Sidhe or even the Ceffyl had turned against us and had killed the messenger. I refused to believe it, but Nuada decided to take a small band of his Guards to Goibhnie’s Island. When he got there, oh horror, a horde of demons swarmed from the sea. All of Nuada's men were massacred, brutally murdered. And during their dying agonies, Goibhnie danced and exhorted them to further atrocities from his battlements. Only Nuada survived. Why, Goibhnie? Why? Why?'

Dryfid's tremulous words dissolved in a flood of tears that stripped the layers of grime from his face, but he recovered his composure quickly and continued. ‘Before he changed, Goibhnie was a good ...

man. He helped us, gave us things, guided us. But he changed so much. So much. He took away the sun, unleashed the plague of demons. Nuada says we must flee Tír na n-Óg and seek refuge amongst the seething masses of Earth. Perhaps he is right. Is he?'

He looked beseechingly at Ace who could only shrug her shoulders. He seemed not to have noticed, or perhaps he had, for he returned his gaze to the dancing flames.

'I … I believe it is a test, a test set by the gods. I asked Caeryon what he thought about it, but I think that recent events have caused him to lose his faith. He doesn't seem to believe anything now. And it would be a rather rash action to begin a theological argument with Sister Keli. .

'I think we must destroy the circle, combat the demons, win back Tír na n-Óg, win back favour ... But I must bow to the majority of the Tuatha de Danaan.'

He paused and the Doctor asked, 'But what of us? You say we can’t return and I understand your reasons. A long time ago I removed two people from their home because I though they might reveal my secrets and the secrets of my TARDIS, but two people in a world of many millions are very few. It would be a drop in the water, a piece of random information that most would ignore - even were we to tell anyone. After all, there are only the two of us.'

'No,' Dryfid shook his head, 'there have been many – over the years - and at this stage we cannot allow anything to jeopardize our safety. You can see that, can't you?' He seemed to be asking for their approval of the sentence of exile.

You don t sound too sure yourself,' said Ace.

Dryfid looked at her sadly. 'I'm not,' he told her. 'But if it were left

to Nuada you would be dead by now. He has strong beliefs and I think he would not tolerate my presence as leader of the Tuatha if I tried to let you return. He would kill you, and then he would kill me. None from your world may go back no matter what. But there is another chance.'

'Yes?' the Doctor asked suspiciously. The word 'chance' had an unpleasant ring of danger to it.

'Goibhnie was once a good man. We will give you food, horses, maps and you may leave Dinorben.

Go to find Goibhnie, try to talk to him, maybe even persuade him that his present course is evil.'

'It's not much of an option, Professor.'

'Yet it is really all there is for you. Nuada will put you out of Dinorben to prevent you entering the circle. At least with the choice I offer you, you will have some sort of purpose out there.'

'Oh well, so long we can get killed on purpose ... ' Ace muttered.

'I once spoke with Goibhnie. I spoke with him many times. He did things for us, helped us, was like a father to the land. He was nearly a god, you see. He cared for us and yet he did not love us, and in the end even that care has been abandoned. Maybe something in his life died.' Dryfid remembered finding Wynne, remembered nearly striking the Sidhe who had led him to her body. It hadn't been the Sidhe's fault, but in that moment Dryfid had wanted someone to blame, to accuse. If he could react in such a way to his loss, how might a nearly-god react?

Ace looked to the Doctor and saw a frail figure slumped in a chair. As though he felt her eyes upon him, he guiltily drew himself more erect.

‘There is something in my life,' said the Doctor. His voice was quiet.

‘Yes?' probed Dryfid.

The Doctor paused, uncertain. He seemed to be searching for something. Ace wondered if it was something in his past, or maybe even something in his future. The sudden diminution of the etchings on his face revealed that the connection had been made. 'We accept!' he said firmly.

'You what?' Ace exploded, pushing herself up out of her chair.

‘It’s all right, Ace. Save a world and back in time for tea. We accept. When do we start?'

‘Tomorrow. It is past noon and the Fomoir will be growing active. Tonight you will eat well and rest.'

He rose to his feet. ‘I will ask Captain Rhys to arrange some quarters for you, and perhaps he might be prevailed on to show you

around Dinorben.

‘Don't I get any say in this? Ace whispered savagely to the Doctor.

‘It’s all right, Ace, I know what I'm doing. He tapped the side of his nose and winked at her.

Realization dawned on Ace. 'Oh, I get it. Right.’ She mirrored his actions and gave him a quick dig in the ribs, eliciting a wince. Together they followed Dryfid into the council room, where Captain Rhys was still waiting patiently. Cyllell remained lying before the fire, acknowledging their departure merely by opening an eye for a second.

'Captain, would you prepare accommodation for Ace and the Doctor - just for one night? And after that, you could take them around Dinorben.'

'Yes, sir.'

‘And now I shall retire. Farewell, Doctor. Farewell, Ace. I shall not see you tomorrow but may Dagda ride alongside you and the Land Mother support and nourish your footsteps. He disappeared to rejoin his wolf by the fire.

‘So you’ve agreed to the same foolhardy mission, have you?’

‘So it would seem,’ the Doctor answered.

‘Well, you’d better some along with me then. Dagda alone knows why I’ve got to nursemaid you.

I’m a soldier, this should be Caeryon’s job, but the little reptile’s never around when you need him – not that that’s very often.’

‘You don’t get on very well, do you?’ said Ace.

‘What makes you think that? We were close friends when we were young – still are for that matter.’

‘It isn’t always the way,’ commented the Doctor.

‘What’s that? No, I don’t suppose it is. Just because we’ve different opinions, different ways of behaving, different views of life, doesn’t mean we can’t like each other.’

‘Congratulations, Captain. You could start a whole new philosophy, talking like that.’

‘Are we going or what?’ Ace butted in.

‘Ah yes, time and tide wait for no man. Lead on Mac … er, Captain.’

Rhys took them back down to the enormous feasting hall. By bellowing for several minutes he managed to summon a servant whom he dispatched with instructions for the preparation of rooms for the Doctor and Ace. Once this was finished with, he turned back to them.

‘I don't know what you expect me to show you. You do have people, kitchens, bedrooms corridors, staircases where you come from, I assume?'

'This is true.'

'I suppose I could take you up on to the ramparts, give you some

idea of where you'll be going, show you what you'll be up against.'

'An excellent suggestion Captain,' the Doctor agreed enthusiastically 'Why don't you do just that?'

'Well, come on then.'

The Captain led them through narrow corridors and winding passageways which gradually inched upwards through the solid handiwork of long-dead stone masons. He explained that he was avoiding the main routes to reduce the number of people they would meet. As it was, they saw no one. Their course was interrupted briefly by two spiral staircases, one of which bore a wall exposed to crumbling, soggy soil. Water trickled in multiplicitous rivulets down the steps. The walls along the way were adorned at intervals with lush tapestries which Ace realized fitted into a sort of pattern. They appeared to depict scenes from the lives of a variety of heroes, distinguishable only by the colour of their hair. At the lower levels, the hero was depicted as a young boy, weaponless and relying on his wits to gather the accoutrements of a warrior. As they rose, the tapestries moved on to the hero's wooings and then to his adventures in a world populated by strange creatures - fairies, centaurs and unicorns, Ace would have said. She wondered for a moment how centaurs and unicorns had found their way into a world of ancient Celts, but quickly forgot the thought. Higher still, the hero began a voyage across turbulent seas, encountering many strange islands. The tapestries of each hero inevitably ended with a visit to an isle inhabited by a strange, hooded figure atop a spindly tower, following which the hero's life ended and he was carried away on a burning ship. These were the stuff of legends, Ace thought, but in Tír na n-Óg, the stuff of legends was probably what had actually happened.

Finally they emerged into the open air. The top of the wall was divided into two levels, the higher of which looked over the encamped masses of Dinorben and bore various weapons of war, most of which were unattended. A catapult stood alone amongst its ammunition and next to that was what appeared to be a giant crossbow, its weapons hewn whole from tree trunks. This was the level that they had come out on to and from it Captain Rhys pointed out things in which he thought the Doctor and Ace might be interested.

'The lower level, you see, is where the archers and pikethrowers are positioned, along with the tar-burners and others skilled in more close-range combat. This level here is for the machines of war. The bolt-throwers were designed by one of our less sane rulers who developed a paranoia about the great flying beasts - they've never been used in war.' He gave a worried look to the sky. 'To be honest, we're all rather unused to the concept of war of any kind. For so many centuries we have lived in truce with the Fomoir, the Firbolg and the

Sidhe. And even before then the Ceffyl rarely made much contact with us except when there was any great need - a self-seeking group if ever there was one.'

'What's he talking about, Professor?'

'Captain, these names you use, they're unfamiliar to us. Perhaps you could give us some better idea about these people.'

'Not people, their armies are arrayed against Dinorben. Look out there. They seek to destroy us because we seek to return to our true home. We cannot let them through the gateway. How long would we last if we were accompanied by those beasts?'

'But Dryfid told us that Tír na n-Óg is being attacked by demons. You'd leave all these others to be destroyed by them?' Ace was disgusted that Rhys could think this perfectly natural.

The Captain sneered. 'They are kith and kin with the demons Goibhnie created them all and seeks by any means to destroy us.'

'But you've lived in peace for so long. Why should they turn on you now?'

'Who can fathom the ways of monsters? Down there, look. He pointed to one of the grey masses which Ace now interpreted as being one of the attacking armies. 'Down there are Firbolg; semihuman, they have the head, arms and trunk of a true man, .but below that they are horses. The army that faces the gate directly is the mass of the Sidhe; they are humanlike in form, but their bodies are covered with a red hair and their heads are like the head of a wolf. And over there, to the north is the army of the Fomoir. They are men of stone, grey-skinned and with the strength of the earth and the sap of the mountains for their blood. They rest when the sun is at its zenith, even this hellish excuse for a sun, and that is the time when you will be able to leave Dinorben for when the Fomoir rest the other armies ease their attack - if you can call it that.'

And what of the Ceffyl?' asked the Doctor, realizing that Rhys had missed them from his description.

The Ceffyl are not amongst the armies below. They still roam the plains, doubtless to waylay men on their way back to Dinorben. They take the form of an ordinary horse but can be distinguished by the horn which pierces their forehead.'

That s not Ceffyl, dum-dum,' said Ace, 'that's a unicorn.'

Rhys gave her a strange look. 'Aye, that is what Herne called them. But there are many names which amount to the same thing.'

' "A rose by any other name . . ." ' commented the Doctor.

What's that?' asked Rhys.

'Shakespeare,' the Doctor told him, but the Captain's face remained blank. English literature would naturally be a mystery to him.

Rhys turned and pointed out across the land. 'You will travel to the north, through the forests of Coed and then across the plains of Porfa. Beyond that lies the sea and the island of Goibhnie. Come, it is time we ate. I have some food prepared in my rooms.' Once again he led them through the labyrinthine corridors of the wall, as regular as a wyrm's wrigglings through underworld. His quarters were not far, though, and soon they were seated around a sparsely laden table.

‘Venison, bread and wine are all I can offer, I'm afraid. Essential supplies are being distributed at a minimal level.'

‘That's all right. We understand,' the Doctor answered. He took a strip of the meat and tore a chunk off the loaf and motioned for Ace to do the same. Rhys poured wine into wooden goblets and passed them to his guests.

Ace took a sip and nearly gagged at the bitterness. ‘What’s is that?'

‘I think it's meant more for softening the bread than for drinking by itself,' the Doctor told her.

‘After a few mouthfuls you hardly notice the taste,' Rhys added.

‘Why?' Ace coughed, 'does it burn away your taste buds?’

‘Stop complaining, Ace. You've been far too spoiled in your choice of food. Maybe I should put you on to a more restricted diet.’

'Ha!' Ace took a piece of the meat and bit into it. It’s a bit salty, isn't it?'

'Ace,' the Doctor said warningly.

‘Wasn't complaining, just commenting.'

‘It is put into salt to preserve it.'

‘That'd explain it.'

They finished the meal in silence, except for Ace's winces at the searing taste of the wine When they had all stopped eating, Rhys stood and said 'Now I shall show you to your quarters for the night. Follow me.'

The Doctor's room was on the same level as Rhys's and had a small window which commanded a wonderful view of Dinorben in all its squalor. A small log fire burnt in one corner and the bed was heaped high with blankets dyed with every possible shade of browny-red. The room was devoid of all ornament.

‘We usually accommodate one of the chiefs here, but as you are an honoured guest from the other world you may use it.’

‘There is only one bed,’ said Ace. ‘One of us will have to sleep on the floor.’

‘You are not staying here,’ Rhys said. ‘We have a room for you down in the ladies’ quarters.’

‘What? I’m not leaving the Professor.’

'It'll be all right Ace. Run along.’ Rhys was already going out through the door and so didn’t see the exaggerated wink that the

Doctor gave to Ace. She gave him a quick thumbs-up and turned to follow Rhys.

'Right, I'll catch you later, Professor.'

'Sleep well, Ace.'

The room which was finally revealed as being hers was tiny compared with the Doctor's and had a single guttering candle as illumination. There was no window on to the outside world. The only consolation was that it was warm, apparently because the main chimney from the kitchens ran nearby.

The candles smelt strongly of candle-smoke.

'You will be woken in the morning and taken to the Doctor's room where you will wait for me.'

'Right-o, guv,' Ace nodded.

'It would be inadvisable to leave your room. It is easy to get lost in the corridors.;

'I shan't move from this spot,' Ace told him. He looked narrowly at her and then turned and left, slamming the door shut behind him.

Ace threw herself on to her bed and let out a grunt of pain. She shifted the blankets to one side and found that there was almost no padding. Ah well, she thought, it may be uncomfortable, but it does you back the world of good. She lay back on the bed and as she grew accustomed to the sound of her own breathing, the more distant sounds beyond the walls began to seem clearer to her. Somewhere nearby, girlish voices were raised in chatter; further away, the sound of metal striking metal was repeated again and again, and in amongst these noises there was a low general murmur of speech as though the walls of Dinorben were whispering quietly to themselves.

When at last the sound had fallen to a minimum, Ace eased herself up from her bed and stretched.

She opened the door softly and looked up and down the passageway. Nobody was around and so, closing the door behind her, she set off into the maze. She had paid close attention to the route by which Rhys had brought her down from the Doctor's room and knew exactly where she was going. This tapestry here, a door there, a particular twist in the corridor were all the direction she needed. The journey took twenty minutes only because she had to tread cautiously. At one point she ducked into a darkened doorway as a couple of soldiers walked past; as she hid there she heard the loud rumbling of a sleeper undisturbed by troubling dreams. Finally she arrived at the Doctor's door. She pushed it open and looked in; the bed was empty and the fire was burning low. She looked around puzzled until a voice heralded her.

'Ace, what are you doing here?'

The Doctor sat eased into the slit in the wall which took the place of a window. He seemed to have been looking out. She wondered how long he had sat there.

'What's the plan, Doctor? How are we going to get back through the circle? Back to Earth?'

'Whatever gave you the idea that I planned to do that, Ace?'

'Well, all this ... ' She mimicked his winking and tapping of his nose.

'Nervous twitch, Ace.'

'But surely we're not going to go out there when there's all these demons around?'

'I think we ought to, Ace. There's something peculiar about all of this. A Celtic culture on another world with a highly technological matter transmission device disguised as a stone circle? Unicorns and centaurs? And then this business of a sun vanishing? I fully intend to investigate.'

'But they're savages!' Ace protested, thinking back to the burnings she had seen.

'I've seen worse atrocities committed on Earth. This is a world in turmoil. Something needs to be done for it. Now go back to your room, get some sleep and we'll discuss it in the morning.'

'But, Professor!'

'Night, Ace,' he dismissed her.

Ace turned, slammed the door shut and stalked off down the corridor. She hardly noticed that she wasn't paying attention to where she was going and when she finally came out of her annoyance with the Doctor she was lost. She stamped her foot in anger and wondered which way she'd come. She could trace her footsteps back a few metres but then there was an intersection and try as she might she couldn't be certain which branch she'd come down. She felt fairly sure, however, that she hadn’t descended any stairwells and so she hoped that she would be able to wander around this level until she found the Doctor’s door again. With this purpose in mind, she set off along one of the passages. But the more and more she wandered around hoping to recognize some landmark, the more and more frustrated she became. It seemed as though she had been up this particular passage, for instance, at least three times -

this place was nearly as bad as the TARDIS except that she knew intuitively that it couldn't be as big as the Doctor's time machine.

As she proceeded along another identical corridor she suddenly heard footsteps coming towards her.

Her first reaction was to leap into hiding, but then she decided that it would be better merely to ask for some directions. With this in mind

she poked her head out of her concealment, but something about the figure approaching her made her quickly withdraw.

She recognized him from the council room, but she couldn’t remember his name. He had a thick mass of brown hair and a rocky outcrop of a nose. There was something wild about eyes that frightened Ace.

When he was past her, she peeked out into the corridor. He was clad in a chainmail vest and solid wooden sandals held on to his feet by long leather thongs that wound round his legs up to his knees. Ace decided that someone who knew the layout of this place wasn't likely to go up and down the same passage as she had been doing, and so she followed him, staying just out of sight, but within hearing distance of the clop-clop his sandals made against the stone flags. In the end, this strategy made her lose him, and still without finding the Doctor's room. She cursed quietly to herself, but seeing no point in standing around she continued searching.

It came as quite a surprise when she almost fell over the man she had been following. She ducked back into the shadows and watched him. He was standing at a window, gazing through the hole in the wall at who knows what. His lips were moving softly without any speech coming out and his hands clutched the sides of the window tightly. Ace stood and watched him for some time, hardly daring to move lest she reveal her presence, and eventually he sagged and fell back from the window. He stood half crouched for six shuddering breaths and then straightened himself up. He turned to face the corridor and, as he swung about, his eyes for one brief moment seemed to be looking directly at Ace and she saw fires burning there. She gasped in horror, but he did not seem to have noticed her, for he walked away without a backwards glance.

Ace came out of hiding and went to the window. She couldn't recognize the view, but something about the outline of the distant horizon, dark black against the not -quite black of the sky, told her that she was not looking down on the encamped humans. From this she knew that the Doctor's room was on the other side of the wall and she set off again with renewed confidence. Two minutes later she found the door and the path back to her own room.

Back inside she blew out the candle and, with only the flickering light of the torch in the corridor outside to hinder her, drifted into a heavy sleep haunted by a man with red eyes who rode a centaur into battle against men of stone.

5:

An Unexpected Party

Jack dreamed.

He didn't have peaceful dreams. They were haunted by a figure, half man, half horse, which lay with shattered limb and then burst into flames. The fire spread from the centaur and engulfed Jack too until his vision was blurred by the heat. Eventually it shifted to a red haze which became the sun shining through closed eyelids. He opened his eyes and sat up in bed.

He reached across to the bedside table and picked up his watch, gazing blearily at the face until the hands became unblurred. It was two o'clock in the afternoon. The bed on the far side of the small table was empty but showed signs of having been slept in.

Jack stood up and stretched. Pulling a toothbrush from his rucksack he left the room and went through the door across the landing into the bathroom.

He brushed his teeth and spat out the disgusting taste that lingered in his mouth from the night before.

A dash of cold water across his face brought the world into sharper focus and after a brief sojourn on the lavatory he stepped into the blissful embrace of a warm shower.

Working up a fine lather all over his body he thought over the events of the previous evening. As they had walked back into Llanfer Ceiriog from the scene of the crime, David had told Jack of what had passed between him and the centaur. The details were vague, but the centaur's name had been Cheiron and he claimed to have come from a gateway between some stones. He had repeatedly mentioned other names and in his delirium had cursed and ranted against someone called Arawn, but no other details had emerged. When Jack and David had reached the Black Swan, they had booked a room, bought several cans of Newcastle Brown and then retired to their room to discuss what course of action they should take. They had sat up talking into the early hours of the morning and had decided that they would register a complaint at the nearest police station - which close examination of their map revealed was at Gwydyr - and then try to seek out the place that had a stone gateway. Jack towelled himself dry and felt that a great deal of the tension in his muscles had been washed away along with the dirt of travel. He strolled back across the landing and found David waiting for him.

'Well?'

'Well, what?'

'What've you done?' Jack asked. He began to pull on his clothes.

'I called the police in Gwydyr and they weren't interested. I called a Detective Inspector in Swansea and he wasn't interested. And I called the Chief Constable of Clwyd and he wasn't interested. I did, though, manage to get the landlord to give us breakfast -' he looked at his watch - 'seven hours late. '

'Good stuff,' Jack congratulated him. 'But nobody wanted to know about the centaur?'

'It isn't easy persuading people to take a complaint against a policeman who's burnt a centaur to death seriously,' David complained.

Jack nodded.

'I did try to find out about a government research station around here, but no luck.'

'Hardly surprising.'

'No, that was just a load of bull he was spinning us. I guess the thing to do is to see if we can find out where Cheiron really did come from.'

'Yeah,' agreed Jack, tugging a sweater over his head. He pulled it down tight and then spread its edge, revealing a picture of a sheepdog tracking a sheep. 'What do you think?'

'Very cute, yes. A stone gateway - it's not much.'

'We'll just have to scout around, see what we can find. Are you sure there was nothing else he said that might give us a bit more idea?'

Like I said, he was babbling most of the time. I didn't pay much attention after a while. He said ... No, nothing else.'

'We'll see about this meal then, shall we? Then look around for somewhere to camp and we can look for these stones at the same time.'

They shared their meal with the landlord. He'd cooked up a rich, thick stew for his own purposes and welcomed their company whilst eating it. After they had eaten, they sat in the bar and washed down the meal with a couple of drinks. When they stepped outside, after a day without rain, the skies opened and a torrential downpour started. They rushed over to the post office and tried in vain to purchase a large-scale map of the area. With this line of attack thwarted, the two Americans attempted to work out a logical method of looking for a gate between two stones. They reasoned that it must be on a road somewhere and that it was most probably to the west of Llanfer as that was where they had found the centaur. With this in mind, they set off along the road to Gwydyr. As they left the post office, Jack saw a figure standing on the east road out of the village. It looked like it might be the policeman but as he had no intention of renewing that

acquaintance, he paid no attention.

'I sent a postcard to Mom this morning,' David told him as they walked along.

'Oh yes?' Jack brushed away the rainwater that was gathering in his fringe and plastering his hair against his forehead.

'Yeah, I thought I ought to. Well, actually I found the postcard in the drawer in the bedroom. Didn't want to put it to waste.'

They took a few more strides in silence and then Jack spoke up.

'You know, David, maybe we should just forget about last night. Get away from here. '

'No way, Jack. That was murder last night. Just because the police don't want to know doesn't mean that we should ignore it. Hey, don't forget that he spoke to me. He was a real person.'

'I guess you're right. Damn, if only I hadn't seen that policeman. Hey, I've just thought of something.

That vet I called, maybe we should still get him to have a look at the body.'

'If it's still there.'

'What do you mean?'

'Well, if that policeman was trying to cover something up, he's not going to leave it lying around so that we can go showing it to anyone.'

Jack nodded reluctantly. 'Yeah, I guess you're right.; He looked up from the road. 'Hey, there's someone coming,'

David looked up and saw that there was indeed an old man heading down the road towards them.

When they drew level, David gave a cheerful smile and said, 'Good afternoon, Sir, do you think you could help us?'

'What can I do for you, boys?' the old man asked: There was a note of distrust in his voice. Jack vaguely recognized him as the occupant of the bench outside the pub.

'We're looking for something - a gateway made of stone. I don't suppose you'd know of anything like that?'

''Well, there's lots of gates around here, but only the posts are made of stone, see?'

'I guess so. Thanks very much anyway.'

The old man smiled at them. 'Good luck, boys. I hope you find what you're looking for.' He tottered off down the hill.

'He's right, you know,' Jack said. 'It is a bit of a hopeless cause.'

David clapped him on the shoulder. 'Yeah, but it's worth it, isn't it?'

Janet stood at her kitchen table and kneaded the pastry firmly with her knuckles, then formed it into a ball and pressed down on it again. It very nearly had the consistency she wanted. Just a couple more turns and it would be ready. She dipped a hand into the box of

flour and sprinkled a light dusting on to the surface then she ran her hand up and down the rolling pin to give that a covering of flour as well.

With a few passes the pastry was thin enough to use and she carefully lifted it into the dish. A knife trimmed the excess edges off neatly and she picked up the bowl of filling that she had prepared some months earlier and frozen for later use.

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There came a loud hammering at the front door. Janet sighed, quickly washed her hands, hung her apron over the back of a chair and then went to see who could be so anxious to get in. The banging didn't stop in all the time it took her to get to the door.

'What is it?' she asked irritably as she pulled the door open. She gave a gasp as two figures fell through into the hall. She closed the door and turned round, but both had already gone into the living room. She hurried after them.

'Doctor, Ace, what's going on? I ... what's happened to your clothes?' Concern tinged her voice.

Neither were dressed as they had been when they had left that morning. Their clothes had been replaced by what appeared to be old potato sacks secured around their waists by thin, tatty pieces of leather. The Doctor was wearing knee-high calfskin boots, stained with mud and blades of grass, and Ace's feet were bare.

Ace had fallen in front of the fire and was now huddling up close to it while the Doctor leant against the wall by the window. He gave an anxious look outside. His breath was shallow and quick and his arms trembled.

'What's happened to you? You need something warm in you. I'll be back in a moment.' She hurried through to the kitchen, quickly emptied a tin of soup into a saucepan and put it on the hot plate of the Aga. She went to the back door and called up to the shed.

'Hugh! Hugh! Come here, quickly. It's the Doctor and Ace, something's happened to them.'

Hugh appeared at the door of the shed. 'What's that? Where are they?'

'In here, they've just turned up now. Come quickly, love, there's something the matter with them.'

'Right ho.' He hurried down and followed her inside.

'Something's happened to their clothes, and they wouldn’t say anything to me. Go and look, they're in the front room.’

Hugh went through and Janet gave the soup a couple of stirs. Hugh came back in. 'I think we'd better put them to bed and get the doctor in to see them. '

'I'll just give them this soup then.' She poured it into two mugs and carried them into the living room.

Ace was curled up now, her hands hiding her head. The way she lay by the fire reminded Janet of something.

'Hugh, have you seen Badger anywhere?' she asked her husband as she knelt at Ace's side. 'Here you are love, try and drink this.' Ace took the cup reluctantly and then clutched it to herself, spilling the hot liquid on to her front. 'Careful, love, careful' Janet chided softly.

'Come and sit down and drink this,' Hugh told the Doctor. He guided the Doctor to a chair, but could not persuade him to drink.

Janet and Hugh stood in the doorway and watched the two shivering figures.

'What on earth do you think can have happened to them?' Janet wondered.

Hugh looked at them. 'Their minds seem to be in retreat from something.' he said. 'I'm going to call young Doctor Snape. Why don't you put them into bed? Try to keep them warm.

Ace shivered.

With a hefty blow, David hammered the last peg home and climbed inside the tent.

'Snug as a bug,' he announced.

Jack crawled in. 'Eeurgh!' he said. 'Not .as snug as these bugs.' Hundreds of small black bodies, casualties of suffocation, littered the walls and floor of the tent.

'Mosquitoes ' David commented, scraping a tiny corpse off the canvas, 'the bane of every camper.

They bite you when you sleep and turn your tent into a morgue when you re awake. So much for insect repellent.'

They had wandered along the Gwydyr road looking for a gate but, despite a couple of promising starts, had been unable to come up with anywhere that looked like a potential source of centaurs. One of the particularly unsuccessful missions through a stone gateway had led them along two miles of dirt track to a tiny cottage inhabited by an old woman who chased them away with a broom handle and then, from a distance, swore at them in Welsh.

When the sky had begun to grow dark, they had turned back towards Llanfer Ceiriog, still determined to find the gateway, and had decided to pitch their tent in a field for the night: They had always been told that they should ask permission if they were going to camp in a field, but it was shielded from the road by a screen of trees and there didn't appear to be a farm in sight, so they didn't bother.

With a flourish David hurled his sleeping bag along the tent while keeping hold of one end, so that it unrolled itself and lay ready for

him. Jack spread his out more sedately and both of them stripped down to shorts and T-shirts in preparation to sleeping. They pushed their clothes into their rucksacks which were propped up against each other at the closed end of the tent.

Jack squirmed into his sleeping bag and then writhed on the ground, trying to get comfortable.

'Come on, David, let's get some sleep.'

David zipped the tent shut and pulled his bag up around him. He reached out an arm and switched off the torch. They lay there in the darkness, listening to each other's breathing.

The sound of a car passing drifted down from the road and in the distance they could hear the stream trickling between its stones. Soft night noises gradually became evident, lulling the two Americans towards sleep. Jack slipped into the semidoze that comes before true sleep and in his mind's eye found himself skating on an icy pond like a figure by Brueghel.

'Hey!'

Jack smashed through the ice at the sound of David's voice and jolted awake.

'Did you hear that?' said David.

'What?' Jack asked.

'I thought I heard a voice. Nearby.'

'I didn't hear anything. You were probably dreaming,'

'No, I was wide awake. I was thinking.'

'Hal' Jack snorted, 'you must have been dreaming.'

'Be quiet a moment, Jack, I ... '

Suddenly the tent collapsed and Jack felt himself being smothered by the folds of canvas as hands grabbed at him. There came the sound of tent material tearing and voices raised in Welsh.

Lights flashed in Jack's head as something struck him. He vaguely heard David crying out, but he couldn't rise. Slowly his limbs eased themselves back into action and he heard the voices retreating, but David was still shouting. He struggled from the confines of his sleeping bag and stood, looking around wildly. Headlamps glared in his eyes and he dimly saw the shape of a van pulling away. He ran after it, but it was accelerating and he hadn't a hope of catching it. But still he ran, following it into the road. The gravel stabbed into his bare feet and he winced from the pain.. There was a screeching of brakes and Jack stopped, watching the van disappear into the night. He turned to face the sound of the voice behind him.

‘What the hell do you think you're doing, lad? At your age, you should know better than to throw yourself in front of cars.’

A massive figure stood half in, half out of the car that had come to a halt behind Jack. The bright light from the headlamps made it

difficult to make out the details of the man's face and Jack tried to shield his eyes as his head began to throb.

'Now why don't you tell me what's going on?'

Hugh stood over the Doctor and looked down. Doctor Snape had been and gone. He had been puzzled by what he had seen, but had said that the Doctor and Ace both appeared to be sleeping normally now.

There were some signs of malnutrition, he had said, and had recommended that they go and see their own doctors as soon as possible. He had assured Janet and Hugh that it was only a matter of time before they woke up.

Janet came in and stood beside Hugh. He put his arm around her shoulders and drew her close to his side. Something about the Doctor made him shiver and he wanted to feel the comforting warmth of his wife's body.

'Look,' he said, 'his eyes are moving under his eyelids. I read about that once. It's called rapid eye movement. It means he's dreaming.'

'Where'd you read that, love?'

' *Reader's Digest*, I should think.' He gave an embarrassed shrug. 'Must have been at the dentist.'

Janet looked at the Doctor and sighed. 'I wonder what he's dreaming about?'

6:

A Journey in the Dark

The odour of damp straw soaked in urine and concealing packed layers of faeces alerted the Doctor that they were approaching the stabling and the lower levels of Dinorben.

'They never mentioned this on the *Horse of the Year S* how, *'* Ace complained.

'The stables house three hundred and are sorely undermanned. All the detritus and stench from above tends to drift down here and few are willing to volunteer for a tour of duty amongst the beasts,' Rhys told them.

He had arrived in the Doctor's room, an hour after Ace had been brought there, bearing two packs of supplies. Ace had emptied one of them on the floor and had sorted out the articles that she thought would be useful; the rough mat, the blanket, the Tír na n-Óg clothing, the blunt knife, the tin pot and the tinder box had been discarded as she had their equivalent in her own rucksack. The Doctor had hefted his own pack and then dropped it, allowing Ace to take the food from it. He had taken the map out of Rhys's hands and stashed it away inside his jacket pocket.

'You have a journey of several days ahead of you,' Rhys warned them, picking the pack up from the floor.

The Doctor smiled and patted Rhys on the back. 'Don't worry about us, we always travel light. '

The stables were long and dimly lit, filled with the whinnying of horses and the sound of hooves on stone. A blacksmith worked in a soot-filled room just inside the entrance. A passing stableman, pushing a wooden barrow abrim with soggy straw and droppings, gave Rhys a cursory salute.

‘One of the Guard,' Rhys told them, once he had passed. ‘He let one of the Firbolg get over the wall a few nights ago He’s down here as a punishment.' He paused and looked about himself. 'I think two bays have been prepared for you. This way.’

They went along a narrow corridor between parallel rows of stalls from which the curious heads of horses peered, occasionally neighing at their visitors. He halted in front of a half-door with a white triangle marked on it in chalk.

‘These are the ones. They've got all the tack ready. You can both ride?’

Ace nodded.

‘To an extent, yes,' the Doctor expanded.

‘You’d better put these packs on the horse. You won’t be able to

ride properly with that bag weighing on your back. We can balance that and this pack across the horse's back. He went into the stall and slung the burden over behind the rough saddle, then he led the first of the horses into the narrow passage. He handed the reins to Ace.

'If you carry on down here, you'll eventually get to a wider space. Wait there for us.'

Ace set off until she came to an intersection of corridors which appeared to be the place that Rhys had indicated. She rubbed the horse's nose and let it lick her arm. It had a star of white on its head and a long stripe extended along the length of its nose. It was mainly a dark brown colour apart from the ends of its legs, its tail and the tips of its ears. Its eyes seemed bright with intelligence.

The Doctor came out of the passageway with a similarly coloured horse. Rhys followed close behind.

'Right, Doctor, Ace, it's nearly noon. I'm going to take you to a concealed entrance at the foot of the wall. Once you're outside, there is no turning back. You may not re-enter Dinorben. You must make all haste through the Fomoir encampment. They will be powerless to stop you.'

'Yeah, yeah,' said Ace, 'we've been through all this before. If you're going to turn us out then why don t you just get on with it?'

'Very well, follow me.'

The journey to the door was short and uneventful. A guard stood by the featureless slab of stone that was their gateway to the outside world. He didn't salute Rhys, but looked suspiciously at the Doctor and Ace.

'Are these the two?'

'Of course they are, fool! Open the door.'

The guard reached into a crack in the wall and the door swung open, gliding easily over polished, frictionless surfaces.

'Quick, go through now. There isn't a moment to waste.' Rhys ushered them and their horses through the opened portal. When they were outside he gave them a quick farewell 'Dagda rides with you' - and ordered the exit sealed.

The Doctor and Ace stood alone again in the twilight world of Tír na n-Óg. Not a hundred yards away lay the Fomoir camp filled with an ominous silence. The wall of Dinorben stretched high up above them, cutting off their only link with the passage home and safety.

'We'd better go, Ace,' the Doctor said, helping her up on to the back of her horse. He leapt nimbly on to his own steed and encouraged it into a slow walk. Ace followed suit, drawing alongside him, and they approached the first of the Fomoir tents.

Ace gave a gasp of surprise - a figure sat in front of the tent, half

hidden by the voluminous flaps of canvas. In the dim light, the creature's skin seemed grey as the stones of Dinorben and utterly hairless.

The head was wide and squat, almost Neanderthal in its appearance. Eyes burned like coals beneath a protruding forehead.

'Why doesn't it do anything?' Ace asked.

'You heard Captain Rhys,' the Doctor answered. 'They're inactive when the sun is at its height. Maybe it's a Circadian rhythm built into their metabolism to conserve energy.'

'But surely that wouldn't stop it attacking us? I mean, we can be woken from sleep and that's a bit like a, er, a ... '

'Circadian rhythm? Well, luckily for us, it can't do anything about us.'

They continued through the camp. Many eyes were on them, but nothing was done to halt their progress. At one point, Ace thought she saw an arm twitch towards its weapon, but whether or not it was just a trick of her mind, nothing came of it. She felt uncomfortable with all those eyes following her slowly - she could almost feel them probing into her and said so to the Doctor.

Maybe they have some latent telepathic ability?' he suggested. ‘Who can tell? We’re dealing with an unknown species here, so it’s too early to say.’

Ace shivered at the sensation and glanced around uneasily. The feeling was becoming oppressive when, at last, they reached the other edge of the camp.

‘Time for a gallop,’ the Doctor said. ‘We should get away from here now.’

‘Halt, men-people!’ a commanding voice rang out. From out of the gloom rode a troop of soldiers.

Ace looked again and her eyes widened.

‘Professor, they’re centaurs!’ she exclaimed.

‘Firbolg, I believe the local name is,’ that Doctor reminded her.

‘Men-people,’ the leader saluted them with a double-stamp of his forefeet. He was tall and well-muscled. The long hair hanging from his head matched the colour of his coat. ‘Men-people,’ he repeated, ‘you are foolish to ride out here. The Firbolg have been sorely insulted by your attitude towards us and your refusal to treaty. Under the circumstances there is no reason why we should not cut you down where you stand.’ He pulled an arrow from a quiver slung over his back and put it in his bow.

The Doctor bowed deeply in his saddle before the centaur. ‘Good Master?’

The Firbolg straightened his back and stood proudly. Ace could only admire his handsome physique, so perfectly formed. His yes,

reflecting the dim light of the sun, were red pools of blood and Ace thought that this warrior must surely be well versed in the spilling of life's fluid. 'I am Chawradd of Teiron,' he declared.

'Good Master Chawradd, you are quite correct in your summing-up of the situation, but we two humble travellers have no bonds with the men of Dinorben. We came from the world beyond the stone circle and have been cast into Tír na n-Óg to fend for ourselves.'

'You are from the place that the men-people call Earth?'

'I'm from Perivale,' Ace told him belligerently, as though challenging him to find fault with her place of birth. She shook her head, tossing her long brown hair over her shoulder.

'A village in Earth,' the Doctor said obsequiously. Ace wondered why the Doctor was being so sickeningly polite to the centaur. 'And I am from another world, far from both Tír na n-Óg and Earth.

We want no part in your quarrel with the humans of Dinorben and ask only that you allow us to go on our way so that we may seek an audience with the one called Goibhnie.'

'You see to visit Goibhnie?' Chawradd asked with some surprise. His tail struck out at an imaginary fly

'It is a matter of some urgency.' The Doctor nervously fingered his paisley tie. 'Although Goibhnie has shown himself to be a cruel man, we have been instructed that our only hope of salvation rests with him. We do not hold much hope.'

'Very well. The Firbolg are creatures of honour, unlike you men. We have no quarrel with you only with the men who cower within the fortress of Dinorben. We shall let you pass.'

'Thank you, Master Chawradd,' the Doctor said and bowed again. 'Come along, Ace'

'But do not attempt to re-enter Dinorben. We have strict instructions to kill all those who attempt such folly, no matter what honour commands.'

We wouldn't dream of it,' said Ace. She gave her horse a quick nudge to get it moving after the Doctor. When she was level with him, she asked, 'What was all that grovelling about, Professor?'

He turned in his saddle and smiled at her, with his eyes as much as with the upturned corners of his mouth. 'When you've read the entirety of Greek literature, and written some of it for that matter, you pick up a few facts. Like, for example, what a notoriously proud race the centaurs were.'

'But how could you know that these centaurs would be like that?'

'Just a guess After all, being nice couldn't have done us any harm, could it?'

They rode away from Dinorben, making good progress. The effort

of riding precluded most attempts at talking and left Ace's mind to wander freely. Tír na n-Óg slipped by around her, shrouded in the gloom of permanent twilight. But despite the conditions in which she saw it now, some lingering memory of times past seemed to have remained, captured by the very ground over which they rode.

Images projected themselves on to the screen of Ace's consciousness. A tree, whose leaves were concealed in a spreading blackness, told tales of wild dances by small red figures, their cavortings matched to the sound of weird music. A rocky outcrop stirred feelings of oneness with the surrounding countryside, provoking a rush of sensations from the grass, the small mammals, the uniformly spread clover and something else which reared up on its hindlegs and touched its horn to the sky. Ace began to know what it could be like to live hand in hand with nature rather than in the continual state of conflict which the men of Earth willingly endured. She found herself loving the land of Tír na n-Óg despite seeing it at its worst. It? she thought questioningly. Was that what she had meant? The land had a distinctly maternal feel to it. Protective, she would embrace those who had need but now, when she herself had need, she was being deserted by her children.

Ace started guiltily at the thought of motherhood. Was that what mothering was all about? Would Ace's own mother feel the same way? Had Ace treated her mother in exactly the way that the men of Dinorben were treating their own Land Mother? Uncomfortably, she closed off that line of thought and turned her mind away from the land.

Overhead, Arawn's Wheel grew shrouded in cloud and shone more and more dimly as it approached the western horizon. Finally, its upper circumference gave a single, last glimmer of light before vanishing completely. Dinorben was now far behind and they had passed through what the map indicated was the first outflung edges of the great forest through which they had to travel.

'It's about time we looked for somewhere to spend the night,' the Doctor told Ace as they rode out of a small wood, 'and this looks like it might just be the place.'

Ahead of them was a small group of buildings, a farm by the look of the fields around it, sectioned off into different crops. Something seemed to have been let loose in several of the fields, for they were trampled by heavy feet.

They rode up along the track that led into the yard around which the buildings clustered. The Doctor dismounted and tied the horses to a post which seemed to have been erected for that purpose.

'Hello,' he shouted. 'Anyone home ?' There was no answer. He went

to the door of the house and rapped on it with his knuckles. It swung open before falling off it's hinges completely.

'My God,' whispered Ace. The interior of the house was blackened and burnt and it reeked of a charnel-house smell.

'Go and wait by the horses, Ace,' the Doctor told her.

'But I ... '

'Do it ' he ordered. She retreated as he went further inside. A couple of minutes later he emerged, his face dark with fury.

'I don't think we should stay here.' He got up on to his horse and tugged the reins free of the post. Ace mounted up as well. The Doctor wheeled his horse round towards the track.

'Please don't leave me here.'

They turned to look at the source of this piteous voice.

In the wide entrance of the barn stood a young girl. She was leaning against one wall as though she could hardly stand.

'Don't go.'

When they had found a place to sleep, away from the farm, the Doctor sorted out portions of the beef jerky that they had been given as food and they listened to the girl's story while they ate.

'My name is Bathsheba,' she told them. 'A few days ago my father sent me into the woods to gather kindling for the fire. With Dagda's Wheel gone, the world has grown colder and we need all the heat we can produce. He said it was the only job I can do. My arm, you see, and my leg is not much better.

The Doctor and Ace had indeed seen how poorly developed the muscles in the limbs of her right side were. She had stumbled across the yard and been unable to lift herself on the Doctor's horse.

'I went out into the wood and did my best, despite my weakness, but it takes such a long time. I lay down to rest between the roots of a tree and fell asleep. When I awoke, Arawn's Wheel was low in the west and I realized that I had slept through a whole night. I was stiff and cold and it took me a long time to walk back to the farm. I knew that they would not be worried because they would hardly have noticed I was not there. But when I got back, they were all dead, all of them.' She started to sob. The Doctor went over and held her in his arms.

'There, there, Bathsheba, it's all over now. There's nothing more you can do about it, Bats.'

This seemed to still her tears. She looked up at him with soulful eyes.

'It's all my fault,' she said, 'because I'm wicked and ugly.'

'What do you mean?' Ace asked. 'You're not wicked or ugly.'

'What do you call this?' Bathsheba asked indicating her withered arm. 'I might as well have been born a witch. The demons smelled me

and came to kill my family so that they .could take me away.'

'But they didn't, did they?' Ace pointed out. 'That proves it wasn't your fault.' Bathsheba shrugged silently but wouldn't say any more about it; she seemed to be trying to block it from her mind.

But slowly she told them more about herself, and when she discovered that the Doctor and Ace were from the world described in her book, she came close to being delighted and asked them question after question. With some encouragement, she produced the book from her pocket. It was the only thing she had rescued from her home.

'Ah, the Bible.' The Doctor took it from her and opened the cover to look at the inscription there. 'A late eighteenth-century copy, I see.'

'You've read it?' Bathsheba seemed surprised.

'Oh yes, I even helped with one of the lines. How did it go? I think it started, "In the beginning ... ".

Something like that anyway - it may not even have been the Bible, there are a lot of things that start with, "In the beginning ... ". The Book of Rassilon for one.'

'Stop babbling, Professor,' Ace told him.

'Sorry.' He returned the book to Bathsheba. 'I think it's time we settled down for the night, don't you?'

Ace took a sleeping bag from her rucksack and the spare pack yielded a blanket and mat for Bathsheba to use. The Doctor sat down, his back against the tree they were using for shelter. Bathsheba was soon asleep, but Ace stayed awake for a time and whispered quietly to the Doctor.

'Why are the Firbolg and Fomoir trying to get into Dinorben, Professor?'

'They're afraid, Ace. Understandably perhaps – after all, the sun has vanished and demons roam the land. Sounds like it might be the end of the world to me. And the humans are afraid that if they let the others through then the men of Earth will discover the stone circle and prevent the outflow of refugees Nobody wants to know people who haven't got a home.'

'It seems so callous though. I mean, I can sort of see their point of view but leaving all these others to die …' She tailed off and gave a sad sigh.

'Look, Ace.'

'What?' She sat up in her sleeping bag and looked to where the Doctor was pointing. Although the sunlight had faded some hours ago there was an orange glow along the horizon to the north. It highlighted the black outline of the forest in the distance and the tops of the low hills around the travellers reflected the light dimly. 'What is it?' she asked.

‘Who knows?' The Doctor raised an eyebrow. ‘But we’re heading that way, so I should think we’ll find out. Now go to sleep, Ace.’

'G'night, Professor'

'Goodnight, Ace.'

'G'night, John-boy'

'Sssh, Ace. Go to sleep.’

Thermal identified at 1:1: *0:100. Alter heading* to *accommodate.*

Rise 1000.

Awaiting instructions.

Scan.

Target identified at 3:7:4:3560. Motion vector 3:7. Alter heading to accommodate.

Descend 3460.

Awaiting instructions.

Ignite primary burner. Eructate.

Descend 100.

Extend #3411, #3412.

Consume target.

Awaiting instructions.

The new day dawned as dull and oppressively as the day before and was only the Doctor shaking her that woke Ace - there was certainly not enough light from the sun. Bathsheba was left to sleep until they were ready to leave. She sat in front of the Doctor, supported by his arms on either side. The additional passenger made it difficult for them to proceed any quicker than a fast trot, but before an hour had passed they were within sight of the forest of Coed. The map indicated that there was a thoroughfare which offered a safe passage through the mighty woodland. They rode up close to the edge of the trees and then they followed the borders in the hope that they would intersect the road.

As noon approached the Doctor reined in his horse and called Ace to a halt. He pointed into the trees.

'Look, a light.'

Between the trunks a bright white light was shining. It had a soft quality, like moonlight in a lover's eyes, and it ebbed and flowed as they watched.

'Do you think we should go and see who it is?' Ace asked. ‘They might be able to point us in the direction of the road. '

'I'm a little wary, , the Doctor said, 'because in a land which has yielded up centaurs I can quite conceive of a will o' the wisp existing. Bats, have you heard of such a thing? A light which lures travellers to their doom?'

Bathsheba looked frightened at the idea but admitted that she had never been warned about anything like that.

'Well, then, shall we see?'

They dismounted and led their horses amongst the trees. The light grew no brighter but nor did it recede, enticing them into the depths of the forest. A strange whispering noise drifted towards them at first, and just as they were nearing its source, a mighty voice cried out, 'Done it! Amazing, quite amazing. Come, Doctor, come and see what I've done.'

The Doctor turned to Ace in surprise, but then shrugged his shoulders and went on, emerging into a clearing filled with light. At the centre of the clearing sat a figure, human in shape, but sitting he was taller than the Doctor and an aureole, a nimbus of moonlight, surrounded him.

'If I can just orient myself to you properly,' the figure said. Ace wondered what he could mean, after all he was facing the Doctor head on.

'It is Herne,' Bathsheba whispered with awe in her voice.

Suddenly the figure reached down and from between his hands a shoot leapt from the ground, became a sapling and then shot up until, clenched between his hands, he held a young oak tree. He stood up and ran his fingers over the wrinkled bark and stepped back, a look of puzzlement on his face. He smiled at the Doctor.

'I think I may talk now,' he said. 'Sit, sit and eat.'

'Yes, we have been riding since morning,' the Doctor agreed. 'Maybe we should eat.'

They sat facing the strange being. Ace took some food from her pack and passed it round.

'I am Herne,' the creature said.

'It *is* Herne,' Bathsheba said again. 'I have heard of him, never thought that I should see him. If only Siân could be here.'

'I think that I must offer you an apology, Doctor, for not only am I to leave you soon, but the next time I see you, I fear I shall perform you a great ill. I have thought much on what I shall do and now realize that what you did was necessary and perhaps beyond your power to control.'

'Herne?' Bathsheba asked. 'My body is poor and weak and it is said that you, like Goibhnie, are able to heal, that you protect the weak.'

'I must go now. Goodbye.' He screwed up his face and with some apparent effort walked out of the clearing. The effulgence faded as he went.

'What a strange chap,' the Doctor mused.

'You are heading the right way to reach your path,' a distant voice carried through the trees to them.

'Weird,' Ace dismissed him. She tried not to be impressed by his trick with the tree.

Bathsheba was disconsolate. 'Herne could do nothing for me. I am cursed, I know it.'

'Don't worry about it, Bathsheba,' Ace said, 'there's nothing so awful about having a bad arm.'

They left the clearing and remounted their horses. Then they continued in the direction they had been heading, at least with the knowledge that they were on the right path. Ace wasn't sire that they were going the right way, however, for the prospect of going to meet a maniac who unleashed demons upon a world did not appeal to the. The Doctor, on the other hand, seemed to think that it was vital that the meeting should occur. Perhaps he was right, but could they really persuade Goibhnie to turn to the good once more?

At last they came to the road through the forest. The entrance was guarded by two stone sentinels, carved into the shape of warriors holding swords prepared for battle. With some disgust Ace noticed that from the belt of one of the warriors hung a brace of human heads. The Doctor explained to her that it was an ancient belief amongst the Celts that the head was the seat of the soul and so warriors collected the heads of their enemies as trophies and to take on the strength of the dead men.

Leaving the grisly sculpture behind, they set off into the forest along a road which became more and more overgrown the further in they went. The sounds of the forest became less and less the deeper they penetrated. Near the edge there was much birdsong, but as they left behind the plain the forest grew quieter until Ace commented to the Doctor, 'It's as though we were the only living things here, Professor.'

'Trees are living things, Ace, and if you listen carefully you can hear them going about their business.

Photosynthesis, transpiration, evaporation. All have their own very distinctive sounds.'

'You're making that up. You can't hear anything.'

The Doctor gave her a hurt look and huffily straightened the lapels of his brown jacket. But then he relented and smiled to her. 'You're quite right. Just trying to enliven the conversation.'

Suddenly Bathsheba spoke up. 'There is something out there.'

'What do you mean?' Ace asked.

'Something out among the trees. It's been following us for the last hour.'

The Doctor looked over Bathsheba's shoulder. 'Are you sure about this, Bats?'

'Oh yes, I heard it earlier, I ... Oh.'

Suddenly the path was filled with swarming figures. They wore simple loincloths and their bodies were covered with red fur. Bushy

tails bristled and swirled about their legs, the white flashes at the tips dancing wildly. The Doctor's horse reared up but tiny hands brought it under control. One of the figures emerged from the crowd and waved a spear at the three travellers. Its dog-face formed words and spoke gutturally. ‘You will come with us. You are our prisoners.'

They were led off the road and into the welcoming arms of the forest which closed about them completely. The Sidhe camp lay a few hundred yards away from the road. There was nothing elegant or sophisticated about this place, stark in its simplicity. It was a cluster of low tents surrounding a central fire over which a pot boiled. A deer was hung on a spit, its tissues bubbling and oozing fat. The small group of Sidhe that had captured them took them into the centre of the camp and pushed them to the ground in front of their leader, who rested on the broken of a once-sturdy oak. As he ran his eyes over the captives, he sucked at a pipe and let sweet-smelling smoke trickle out of the corners of his mouth.

After a long silence he clenched his sharp teeth around the stem of the pipe and growled,

'Humankind, I am Ydvig. Why are you trespassing upon our land when the Sidhe and the men of Dinorben are sworn enemies? What purpose have you in coming here?'

'What's it to you, scumbag?' Ace shouted, her side roaring with pain where a carelessly directed spear had crashed against her ribs.

'Quiet, Ace,' the Doctor suggested mildly. 'We have come ... '

'I do not wish to hear excuses from a humankind, , Ydvig said.

'Then why'd you ask?' snarled Ace.

Ydvig rose and stepped down from his makeshift seat. His eyes narrowed as he approached Ace. 'We have been hearing strange things ever since the bright Globe departed from the sky. Voices tell us that our master has turned against you humans, that he seeks to give the world back to those to whom it belongs.’

‘And who does it belong to?' the Doctor asked.

‘Why us,’ Ydvig replied. ‘Long millennia ago, Goibhnie created a world for the Sidhe, but the paradise was soon despoiled by the arrival of others. And then you humans came. There are those of the Sidhe who have befriended you but now Goibhnie will drive out like the vermin that you are. We shall hunt you down and purge the land of your foulness.' He spat on the Doctor’s feet and turned away.

‘Why do you harbour such hate?’ the Doctor asked. Ydvig rounded on him.

‘Because we were the first and now we are the lowliest. Now you know how it is to feel that your god has deserted you. I sent a warrior to Goibhnie to ask how we should deal with you humankind. He gave

us an answer which was no answer but now he has taken the Globe and he has unleashed his demons to drive you out. He looked at his humblest children and saw that they were in need and he came to their aid.'

Ace looked away from Ydvig and examined the crowd of Sidhe around her. At the back of the crowd, peeping out from behind adults, children gazed with wide, fearful eyes at the humans; the older Sidhe, clutching their weapons tightly, looked at their captives with open contempt. It was human society in miniature – the adults seething with prejudice and the children free of such feelings but being prepared for them every day.

Ydvig motioned to some of his people. 'Tie them up in the prisoners' tent,' he commanded. 'They will be dealt with as we deal with all such – as our creator, Goibhnie, commanded.' He dismissed them with a cursory wave.

The Doctor, Ace and Bathsheba were bundled unceremoniously away from their audience with the leader and pushed into a small tent which had been erected around the base of an oak. Then, backs to the tree, they were bound and left there.

'Is your side all right, Ace?' the Doctor asked.

She smiled at him. 'It's just bruised, really. Feels worse than it is. It only just broke the skin.'

'And are you all right, Bats?'

'I think so '

'Professor:' Ace asked, 'was it just my imagination or were they, well you know, foxes?' Ace had noticed how doglike the faces of the Sidhe were, how their bodies were covered with red fur and a thick brush of a tail.

'Well, obviously they aren't really foxes,' the Doctor said.

'Obviously.'

'But they do appear to have some fox in their lineage. Strange that. I wonder how it happened. I mean, they have opposable digits, better developed cerebral cortex than your average fox, but on the whole they did appear to be foxes.'

'What will the Sidhe do to us? Will they kill us? What would Goibhnie have them do?' Bathsheba asked, her voice tremulous.

The Doctor twisted in his bonds to look at Bathsheba. 'He's turned against your people, Bats.'

'Dryfid told us how he made the demons kill an army,' Ace added. 'Honestly Professor, I don't know why you're so keen to see him.'

There was a slight hesitation from the Doctor. 'Tackle evil at its core,' he said. 'Goibhnie has caused all this trouble – maybe I can make him repair the damage.'

'But now you never will,; Bathsheba moaned. 'The Sidhe are going

to kill us.'

'They won't eat us, will they?' For some reason, the idea that these creatures would actually eat them was more repugnant to Ace than the thought that she might be killed by them. 'I mean, foxes are carnivores, right?'

'Well, strictly speaking, they're omnivores, though I should say that they prefer meat. But you're confusing the Sidhe with foxes, Ace. There's no reason why the Sidhe should eat the flesh of another intelligent species.;

'No, I s'pose not.'

'We must escape,' Bathsheba said.

'I've been trying to get loose,' said Ace 'but these ropes are too tight.'

The Doctor agreed. 'Yes, Erich Weiss never tied knots like these.'

Voices approached the tent and its flap was thrown open. 'Here are your packs, humankind. We have released your steeds into the forest.'

'What are you going to do with us?' Bathsheba called out.

A sly grin crossed their visitor's face and he turned to look at some unseen companion outside the tent. 'Well, I don't know, humankind. We could put you on a spit and roast you over the fire.'

'That is a possibility,' the other's voice acknowledged. The Sidhe withdrew and the sound of uproarious laughter retreated from the tent.

'They mean to eat us!' cried Bathsheba in terror.

'Don't worry, Bathsheba. They were joking about it,' the Doctor told her, but added to himself, 'At least I think they were.'

Their backs grew stiffer and their legs colder and colder as they lay there. Minutes drifted into hours and the sounds outside turned from merrymaking into sleep. Bathsheba, her body numb, sank into a restless sleep, while the Doctor and Ace talked to each other.

'Can you smell that, Ace?' the Doctor asked, his sensitive nose twitching.

What? Yes, there's a sort of tang in the air, isn't there?'

'Yes, it means that snow's coming.'

'You can smell the snow clouds? You're not making things up again, are you? I thought that was just a sort of superstition.'

'Well, occasionally, when the conditions are right, you do get some foretaste. It isn't always completely reliable, but the way this world is going I should say that snow is most definitely in the forecast.'

'What do you mean?'

'The sun has gone, leaving behind it a distant red giant which supplies only a meagre amount of light and heat. I imagine that the only thing that's staving off a collapse into permanent arctic

conditions is the massive heat reserve stored in the oceans. But gradually the temperature will fall. It's only a matter of time.'

'So blue noses and colds all round?'

'Yes, quite. It's a depressing prospect, isn't it? No wonder everyone wants to desert the sinking ship.'

'But why did the sun disappear?'

'Who knows? The possible explanations all seem so unlikely that I wouldn't want to speculate. I think it is definitely important that we get to see this Goibhnie person.'

Bathsheba stirred in her sleep and murmured, 'Goibhnie, help me, don't leave me *behind.'*

The Doctor continued 'It will be most intriguing to meet him, provided we can get close. A dangerous character by all accounts.'

'But they say that he used to be their friend. I wonder why he changed.'

'Another good *question.* You're full of good questions tonight, Ace. If only we had the answers.'

'But we're going to get them!'

That's a very optimistic and admirable attitude, Ace. We will have to escape from our present predicament first.'

'So how're we going to do that?'

'I don't know, Ace. For the moment we don't seem to be in any danger.'

'Apart from having our back sides stuck to the ground.'

'Yes, there is that.' The Doctor wriggled uncomfortably to restore the circulation to his nether regions. He sent a brief message to the circulatory centres of his brain indicating that some vasodilation was necessary, then he restored his attention to Ace. 'It's only a matter of time. I'm sure that some route of escape will present itself.'

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Ace awoke to animal screams of terror. She tried to get to her feet but the ropes were still confining her.

'Doctor. what's happening?'

'Something's attacking the camp. It s been staggering around for the last couple of minutes.'

Above the scream Ace heard a low howling. 'What is that?'

'I don't know. Bats, are you awake?'

'Y-yes.'

'Do you know what would make that sort of noise?'

'No, I've never been so far away from home before. I don't know a thing about the world.'

'It's coming towards us,' Ace shouted. 'Professor, it's coming this way!'

'I know, Ace, I know.'

Bathsheba strained her neck round, looking to the Doctor for direction. 'What should we do?'

'There's nothing we can do. Just hope for the best.'

The animal howling was right outside now. At such close quarters it became more distinct and sounded almost as though it was some garbled language, screamed by an alien tongue.

Suddenly the tree was knocked to one side. Their bonds jerked them along with it. The Doctor was pushed into the decreased angle of the tree. Another blow rocked the tree, and then another, and another.

Suddenly the impacts stopped and the howling drew away from the tent. As it went, the tent flap pulled open briefly and a shaft of white light spilled through. To Ace, the Doctor's face was thrown into a sharp image of light and dark. Then the flap swung shut again and they were plunged back into darkness.

Bathsheba cried out. 'The ropes have loosened!'

'But how ... ?' the Doctor asked.

'Never mind how, Professor,' Ace shouted, 'let's get loose and get out of here.' She shrugged off the ropes and helped her two companions free themselves.

'Come on!' She snatched up her rucksack and slipped her arms through the straps.

'You'll have to help me,' pleaded Bathsheba. 'I won't be able to keep up with you.'

'It's all right. Bats. Put your left arm around my neck and I'll carry you,' the Doctor said. He gathered up her small frame in his arms.

Ace pushed her head out of the tent and looked around. 'All clear,' she said and emerged fully. The Doctor followed her out.

The camp was in disarray. The central fire had escaped its confines and was beginning to catch on the closest canvas sheets. Tents had been knocked over and Sidhe bodies littered the ground, their forms ghastly in the flickering glow from the fire. Moonlight shone through the trees in the distance.

'We've got to get out of here,' Ace whispered to the Doctor. I mean, it might come back.'

'Come back?' Bathsheba asked.

'It's a possibility,' the Doctor agreed. 'We'd better make our way back to the road and get out of the forest as quickly as possible. '

'*Which* way is it?'

'Come on, this way.' The Doctor, carrying Bathsheba, led Ace into the bramble and ferns which made up the ground layer of vegetation. Eventually they came out on the track, though in the dim starlight that filtered through the foliage, this was only evidenced by the Slight reduction in hampering plantlife.

'If only we had our horses still' Ace said wistfully.

‘But we haven’t, we’ll just have to walk. We haven’t any choice.
Scan. arboreal plantation at 6:3:27:1580
M *ultiple signals identified.*
Cancel targeting.
A waiting instructions.
Scan random program. Random instruction #1.

Scan. validity instruction #12.
A waiting instructions.
Target arboreal plantation at 5:2:15:1570
Ignite primary burner.
Eructate.
Awaiting instructions
Observe consequence instruction #12.

By Ace's watch, *it* took them six hours to reach the far edge of the forest. She remained amazed at the Doctor’s stamina in being able to carry Bathsheba all the way. Admittedly, the girl could not be that heavy – at a rough estimate she was only thirteen years old and she had little hair to increase her weight

– but the Doctor did not pause and, of course, did not complain. Once free of the forest Bathsheba walked and they put a further two miles between themselves and the forest, crossing fields of burnt stubble. When the Doctor called them to a halt, they all sank to the ground gratefully.

The Doctor's eyes closed as soon as he was down and Ace fished in her rucksack for a bottle of water and some of the beef jerky. Without opening his eyes, the Doctor stuck out a hand and received some food. With his other hand he took the bottle, took a swig and then returned It to Ace. *She* had never seen him like this before - actually tired, drained of energy lid – and hoped he would recover with a few hours of sleep.

Ace lit a fire between them and she and Bathsheba crouched by it, sucking the heat into their bodies.

‘What happened to you, Bathsheba?' Ace asked.

A blank look crossed Bathsheba's face. 'What do you mean?'

‘Your arm,' Ace explained.

‘Oh, I was born this way . . . and then I had an accident that made it worse.'

‘An accident?'

‘My brother was killed,' was all that Bathsheba would say.

‘I’m sorry.'

‘So am I. I miss him. And ever since he died my life has been different. My father used to care for me, but he blamed me for David dying, I think. It wasn't my fault.'

‘People always find a scapegoat. When things go wrong with their lives they try to blame someone else. I used to live in a place called Perivale. There were these people who couldn't get jobs, whose lives were totally screwed up because they were too dumb to do anything about it. And there were other people who were different, in looks anyway. And the dumb ones blamed the others - they said that they were stealing all the jobs. Because of that they did awful things, bad things, sick things. Just because they were different.'

‘That's like here.'

‘What do you mean?' Ace asked.

'They told me that Druffud was to blame for Dagda's Wheel leaving the sky.'

‘Druffud?'

‘One of the Fomoir who used to work on the farm. They said that was why he had to be burnt.'

Ace's throat constricted and she barely choked out, 'Burnt?'

'Yes, it was horrible.'

'My God, what sort of people are you?' But what had they done to Manisha when they had fire-bombed her flat? Were those yobs any more civilized than the people of Tír na n-Óg? Did the Earth people have any right to inhabit a moral high ground?

'Let's talk about something else,' Ace suggested.

Once again the Doctor was first to awake the next morning. He woke his two companions and urged them to their feet. As they prepared to set off a light snow started to fall.

‘This could be tricky,' the Doctor told them. 'With the sun to guide us we may have to rely on my impeccable sense of direction.’

'So we'll end up wandering in circles,’ Ace said.

'It could happen,' the Doctor grinned.

‘I suppose,' said Ace 'that this might come in handy.’ She produced a heavy rubber-sealed torch from her rucksack.

‘Have you had this all the time?' the Doctor asked. ‘Sorry, stupid question.'

'I didn't want the batteries to run out. And we've had some light most of the time.’

Bathsheba was puzzled 'What is it?’

Ace flicked the switch to the 'on' position. Bathsheba gasped in surprise.

'How does it work?'

'Well, have you got a few days or me to explain some fundamental physical principals to you?’ the Doctor asked her.

Bathsheba nodded vigorously.

‘Yes, I suppose you have, haven't you? Um, let's make a start, shall

we?'

They tramped across the plain of frost-encrusted grass. The Doctor gave his jacket to Bathsheba when she began shivering in the cold and Ace pulled on a pair of luminous thermal leggings. They stopped in unison when, in the distance, they hear a baying howl.

'Wolves?' asked Ace.

'No, no.' The Doctor shook his head. The resonant quality isn't right. That's larger than a wolf, or at least its lungs are. Keep moving.'

They pushed on, but the noise came again and it was closer.

'It's on our scent,' the Doctor said grimly.

'A demon!' Bathsheba whimpered. It s come for me again.'

Maybe we should split up,' Ace suggested It can only follow one of us.'

'But it would just catch us one at a time,' the Doctor disagreed. 'And besides, I couldn't do that.' His eyes scanned the dark anxiously.

Bathsheba had fallen to the ground now, clutching her head in her hands. 'It's come for me,' she told the unyielding earth.

'Fire!' Ace said.

'Maybe, but there's nothing to burn.' A shadow, almost one with the dark, passed by them to the north. 'It's circling us.'

'Nitro-nine!' Ace dropped her rucksack and pulled out one of her explosive cans of deodorant. One of her hands clamped lightly on the lid in readiness. She looked to the Doctor.

'All right, Ace, just this once,' he gave his permission.

The beast moved towards them from out of the gloom. Quick as a flash, Ace whipped the top of the can off and flung it at the advancing creature.

'Five-second fuse!' she cried and flung herself to the ground. An orange and white flower blossomed briefly in the dark.

The creature let out an ululating howl, thick with pain. In the light of the explosion, Ace had glimpsed its long, rangy limbs and its thick trunk; its head sported two bulbous, glaring eyes and its mouth bristled with fangs that dripped saliva.

'Jesus Christ,' she breathed a prayer - the creature was still standing. In an almost human motion, it shook itself as if to clear its head.

Hatred shone in its eyes as it turned to face them. It had them now - they could not outrun it. Now perhaps they would never reach Goibhnie. Maybe this demon had been sent to prevent their approach.

Ace wondered if it would toy with them, like a cat playing with a mouse. She inched closer to the Doctor seeking reassurance. His skin was icy cold.

With a wail of attack, the creature bore down on them. Stretching

its gleaming talons ahead of it, it slashed at Ace's face. She fell backwards, crashing down on to her rucksack. The Doctor reached forward to help her up, but now the beast was over them. It exhaled noxious fumes into her face and its IIWS opened wide to accept her flesh.

7:

Unwelcome Visitors

Inspector Stevens reversed his car a few metres and pulled up on to the grassy banking and into the damp clutches of an overgrown gorse thicket. Jack stumbled alongside the car, trying to pull the door open. When the car came to a stop, he managed to jerk the handle up and almost fell on to the passenger seat.

'You mustn't stop,' he gasped, 'we've got to get after them.'

Stevens *pulled* back on *the* hand brake 'Now just a minute, lad. Get after who?'

'I don't know who they were,' Jack almost shouted. 'But they've got my friend. Kidnapped him.'

'Kidnapped? Stevens queried him .

'Yeah, we were camping in that field d *o* wn there and they just came along, ripped open the tent and bundled David into the van. You must have seen it!'

Stevens nodded. ' *The* van you were *chasing?'*

'Jesus Christ!' Jack shouted and buried his head in his hands. When he turned to look at Stevens he spoke very slowly. 'Look, it's very simple. Those guys have kidnapped David and we've got to get after the bastards.'

'Well why didn't you say so?' Stevens revved up the engine and slammed the car into gear. Spewing mud up from the banking, it leapt into the road. 'You *picked* the r *ight* car to jump in front of,' he commented and took a hand off the wheel for Jack to shake. 'I'm Inspector Stevens of Scotland Yard.'

'Yeah, I'm Jack. Can you keep your eyes on the road?' White arrows intermingled *with* black loomed ominously close in front of them and then swing away rapidly.

'Any idea why these people kidnapped your friend?'

'No… *well,* yes. Sort of You *wouldn*'t believe it though. I saw the damned centaur and I'm not sure I believe *it.'*

Steven's eyes *gleamed* and *the* flab on his face hardened as his muscles tensed. 'My dear chap,' he said flippantly, 'it's my job to believe in things that other people wouldn't credit. Flying saucers? Of course, they exist. Yeti! Saw them in the London Underground twenty years ago. Ghosts! A headless woman in white with a black dog used to walk through my bedroom at midnight. Mermaids? Grandpa was rescued from the *Marie Celeste* by one. Vampires? I always wondered where my dad went to at night. Telepathy? Right now you're thinking that I'm talking crap. So what can *you* tell *me* that I won't believe in?'

Jack shifted nervously in his seat and wondered if he was safe with

this guy. Eventually he ventured,

'Centaurs?'

'Centaurs and unicorns?' Stevens clapped his hands but, Jack was pleased to note, immediately slapped them back on to the wheel. 'This gets better and better!'

Jack was puzzled. 'Who mentioned unicorns?'

'A vet in Gwydyr. He vanished in mysterious, not to say ominous, circumstances shortly after he contacted me. I was supposed to meet him tonight.'

'Kidnapped? '

Stevens nodded gloomily. 'Could be. Tell me about this centaur of yours?'

Jack ran through the events of the previous day. Suddenly Stevens jerked the car to a halt.

'Hughes burnt the centaur?' he cried.

'Hughes?'

'The policeman. He burnt it? What the hell was the man thinking of? A living sentient being and he burnt it? I shall want words with him about that.' He put the car back into gear and set off again. By now they were approaching the junction in the village. Ahead of them they saw ...

'The van! That's the van.'

'You're right.' Stevens held back on the accelerator pedal and they followed the old transit van at a distance. It pulled to a halt outside Constable Hughes's house and a figure got out and darted across the road into the house. The van moved on again with its unseen attendant following.

'We must find out where they're taking David,' Jack insisted when Stevens suggested that they should stop and question Hughes.

'Yes, I suppose so.' They followed for a couple of miles and then without warning the van gathered speed and disappeared round a corner in the road. By the time Stevens had accelerated suitably and got round the bend, the road was empty.

‘Dammit , where the hell have they gone?’

‘There must be a turning off the road.’

‘Well, did you see anything?'

'No.'

'We'll drive back and see if we can find where they went.' He performed a U turn, riding up on the verge of the narrow road and heading back.

Between a narrow alley of low stone walls leading up to a crossbar gate, they found the van. Stevens pulled over, blocking the van’s way out. He regarded it carefully and then, having come to the conclusion

that there was nothing to be feared, he got out of the car and cautiously approached.

He tugged on the scarred chrome handle of the rear door. A second, harder tug opened the stiff door and the stench of stale nicotine came at them in a cloud. A cigarette end smouldered into ash on the floor but there was nothing else inside.

'They got away,' cursed Jack.

'Yes.' .

'So what do we do now?'

'Let's go back and see what we can get out of Hughes. '

Stevens stopped outside the small cottage and turned to his companion in the passenger seat.

Maybe it would be better if you stayed here. I'll go and see what I can do.'

He went up the steps and rapped on the door for the second time that day. An oblong of light, surrounding a bulky silhouette appeared in the darkness. Stevens blinked against the imposition on his retina.

'Oh, it's you. Did you track down any of those people?' Hughes asked.

'People? Oh no. Can I come in constable?'

'I suppose so, boyo. Come on in.'

Hughes showed him through to a small living room where a television flickered without sound in a corner. On the screen a small woman was chatting amiably to another woman wearing a strange hat.

'Just watching *Elinor,'* Hughes shrugged. He went over and turned off the set. 'Sit down.' He gestured towards one of the two worn seats. Stevens settled himself, with a little difficulty, between the stiff arms of one of the chairs.

'I'll get straight to the point. Do you know anything about a centaur?'

'A centaur?' Hughes feigned surprise. 'Now what do you mean by that?'

'Come off it. I'll put it another way, you do know something about a centaur and that's why you burnt it to death last night.'

Hughes chuckled. 'You've been listening to those barmy American boys, is it?'

'There's nothing barmy about it, Hughes.'

Hughes rose from his chair belligerently. 'Oh yes? Have you seen this centaur, boyo? Eh?'

Stevens faltered, some of his confidence gone. 'No, but ... '

'Now look, Inspector Stevens, I've been in touch with the lads in Gwydyr and they told me all about you. You're in charge of some sort of crackpot branch of Scotland Yard and have almost no influence

whatsoever. So just keep away from me with your stupid stories about flying saucers and ghosts and centaurs. I've got more important things to do.'

Stevens struggled up from his chair. 'I may not have much power, but I am your superior officer and I'd quite like to know what you were doing in the vehicle that kidnapped the American boy called David Gibson.'

'That's more nonsense. I suppose the other one told you that he'd been kidnapped.'

'I saw the crime in progress,' Stevens warned him, 'and I saw the van stop outside here and you get out.'

'No, I think you're wrong there.'

'What?'

'I've been watching the television all night. Somebody pushed some leaflets through the letterbox about a quarter of an hour ago. That was probably what you saw.'

'You don't expect me to believe that!' Stevens almost shouted.

The man's gall was incredible

Believe what you like, sir . Perhaps you'd better go no. It's quite late.'

'Yes, perhaps I had better go But I'll be back!'

The *driver's* door of the car was flung open and Stevens threw himself into his seat, rocking the car on its suspension.

'Damn.'

'Didn't go too well huh?'

'Damn! Damn! Damn!' He slammed the flat of *his* hand against the rim of the steering wheel. *'This is* what comes from having a special appointment. Nobody respects you. They all treat you like dirt. ' He revved the engine noisily, venting his frustration on his car.

'You'd arranged to meet him?'

'What? '

'A special appointment?'

'No. I'm the only member of the Yard's Paranormal Investigation Team.' He gave an apologetic shrug as he spun the steering wheel around. 'Once the story gets around my credibility is zero. I couldn't get anything out of Hughes. He knows there's not a lot I can do. I think we should try and get some sleep and then see what we can do in the morning. I'm staying at the Black Swan in the village. I reckon they've got some spare rooms there. How'd you like bed and breakfast at Scotland Yard's expense?'

Hugh awoke bathed in a clammy sweat. He'd been dreaming about the Doctor and Ace still lying asleep even as the universe ended around them; he knew that the Doctor could save them but no matter how much he and Janet shouted neither of the sleepers would awake.

The bedclothes were damp and he reached across to feel Janet beside him. Though the bed was warm and still dinted from where she had been lying, she wasn't there, and when he sat up he realized that there was sound corning from the room below him. It penetrated his sleep-befuddled brain that the sound was the beat of rock and roll music. He eased himself out of his bed, pushed his feet into the waiting slippers and then padded softly across the bedroom floor.

He stood at the top of the stairs and looked down *into* the darkness. A vague anxiety tugged at his mind and he pulled open the door to the Doctor's bedroom. He was still lying there as he had been when Hugh had last looked in. Hugh gave a sigh and then glanced into Ace's room. She was gone - that would explain the rock and roll - and Janet must have followed her downstairs when she had been woken by the music.

Hugh hurried down the stairs and quietly opened the living room door. Only the table lamp was lit and the room was steeped in shadow. The record player turntable spun in endless circles whilst music drifted from the boxlike speakers. Ace sat watching the spinning disc raptly, her face hidden by shade and the mass of dark hair that hung around her shoulders.

'Ace?' Hugh asked, stepping into the room. Her hand reached up and lifted the stylus from the record.

She turned and rose to her feet. Hugh looked more closely. A face that he had not seen for thirty years except in photographs and as a faded, distorted vision was revealed to him. His mind twisted in confusion and bewilderment.

'Janet?' The word caught in his throat. 'Janet, is that you?'

Her hands reached out to him and he moved forward, hardly knowing what was happening. His wife's discarded nightclothes lying over the sofa barely registered on his consciousness, nor the brittle cracking as he stepped across the room.

'Janet.' He breathed the word as he hadn't done since he was first married. He took her in his arms.

Somehow a song started to play over the speakers, a song of love. Hugh began to lead Janet in a slow dance around the room. He nuzzled her lily-white neck, revelling in the sensation. But it wasn't quite perfect - a small triangular mark blemished the otherwise pure skin.

Suddenly the feelings changed as loving warmth shifted to the sticky coldness of death. He looked into the stranger's eyes and saw the Abyss looking back. There was nothing but chilling void there. This was not Janet, nor was it Ace. He had let something into his house which had taken a familiar form, now it wanted to be let into his soul.

Hugh tried to push the phantom of his youth away, but she clung to him with all the strength of the dead.

'Please, no ' Hugh said. He could look down now and see the white sticks that littered the carpet. 'Oh my God!'

The grip was released and Hugh was thrust away into another pair of waiting arms The Doctor's face smiled strangely at Hugh and was the last thing he saw as the strength and substance was drained from his body.

8:

Three Is Company

Ace kicked at the ground, trying to propel herself away from the gaping maw that was descending on her. Momentarily her torch flashed upwards and she saw the forked tongue nestling in the back of the mouth in a sea of foaming saliva. She launched a desperate punch at the hideous jaw.

There was a sudden rush of air and a short shaft of wood impaled itself in the side of the monster's head. More followed in quick succession striking at the creature's face and torso. It fell back, searching for its attacker, and swinging its arms in a savage cartwheel.

'Get away from the demon, girl,' a voice shouted. Ace suddenly found herself surrounded by figures dashing through the darkness. She saw her torchlight gleam on unsheathed swords. A hand fell on her shoulder and pulled her back. She turned to look - it was the Doctor.

'Professor," she gasped.

‘I think we've been rescued, Ace. Help me with Bathsheba.'

A young man, clad in chain mail and with long black hair about his shoulders, ran up to them and shouted, 'Come with me! My men will deal with the demon. You are lucky that we found you. Come on!' He gave the Doctor a slap with the broad side of his sword to encourage him to move. 'This way!'

He led them through the darkness of swirling snow. Gradually, small pinpoints of firelight resolved themselves and they found themselves among humans, old and young. Welcoming hands guided them into the midst of the crowd.

'Who are you?' the man who had rescued them asked.

'I'm the Doctor - and these are my friends, Ace and Bathsheba. And you are?'

'I am Chulainn of the Clyr. Leader of my clan and the guardian of the virginity of Brigit. Am I to take it from your clothes that you are strangers in this land? Outcasts, perhaps, from the place that Nuada tells us is called Earth?’ He took them through the crowd which was waiting for the warriors’ return.

'Something like that'

'Is it true that the Land Mother’s mate lies there?’

'I wouldn't know about that. These are your people, are they?

‘These are the remnants We travel through the land to Dinorben, gathering up the stragglers, Nuada says we must not delay, for the demons roam at will throughout Tír na n-Óg. My people tried to contain them, but in great numbers they are difficult to defeat, Come into my tent and we will talk.;

'Your tent?' asked Ace. ‘I thought you said you were going to Dinorben.'

'We camp here for three days. There are men of the Allan Clwff and the Rhylmrth who are to meet here. Here, I will call for some food.'

He left them alone in the small dank tent which smelt of mould and decay, but was at least warm against the cold of the open air. A mound of furs was piled in one corner; they smelled musty but the Doctor took one and hung it around Bathsheba's shoulders. He looked to Ace.

‘No, I’m all right, Professor Just a bit … well, you know that thing was horrible'

‘A demon,’ Bathsheba said. 'It bore the mark.’

The tent flap was pushed aside and Chulainn came in, holding a leather bag which steamed slightly in the cold air. In his other hand he carried a jug. He dropped the bag on to the ground and let go of the drawstrings. A tug on the edges brought the bag apart and it spread into s small square with a pile of hot meat in the centre.

'There you are. Eat ' He smiled at Ace and she reached forward. and took a piece. It tasted good.

Chulainn rummaged amongst his belongings and brought out some cups. He filled them each with the liquid from the jug. The Doctor took a cup and looked at it enquiringly.

‘Mead,' Chulainn told him.

'Ah, a mixture of honey and water '

Those are the basic ingredients, yes. Please drink.’

The Doctor took a sip and smacked his lips appreciatively. ‘Good –’ he gasped suddenly - 'and with a kick like a mule.'

'So you're from Earth,' Chulainn said.

'More or less.'

'Yes,' said Ace.

'I'm not,' whispered Bathsheba.

'Tell me about it,' Chulainn asked.

'What do you want to know?' Ace asked. 'There's a lot to tell. It's a big place, you know.'

'As big as Tír na n-Óg?'

'Bigger, I should think,' the Doctor told him, 'from what we've seen.'

'And is it like Tír na n-Óg?'

'Not much,' said Ace, 'but I think you'd like it.'

Chulainn looked at Ace appreciatively. She was a lovely young girl in every aspect. 'Aye, I think I would.'

‘Chulainn,' the Doctor said, 'is it a great distance to Goibhnie's

island from here?'

'A two-day journey on a fast horse, if you could avoid the demons. That is where you are headed then?'

'That's the plan.'

'A foolhardy one. Goibhnie will not listen to reason. A rare insanity has gripped his mind since Arawn invaded the sky. I can give you horses if you must persist.'

'We have been given no option. Dryfid will not let us re-enter Dinorben so we must take the chance that he has given us.'

Chulainn shook his head. 'It is no chance at all. But if I give you horses then you may go as far as you can and then return to us. I am sure that the Tuatha will see reason and allow you back into Dinorben.

How are they holding out against the Fomoir and the Firbolg?'

'It's three days since we left, but at that time all seemed well on the human side. A little overcrowded perhaps.'

'Bathsheba's asleep,' Ace told them.

'You must take Bathsheba with you,' the Doctor told Chulainn. 'Her family were all killed in a demon attack.'

'She can ride on one of the carts. But you must stay with us for the night.'

'We would be grateful of that.'

'Yeah,' said Ace, 'it'll be good to have some sort of roof over our heads.'

'You may use this tent. I've already vacated my own tent for two of the women who are giving birth so it isn't as if I've become used to the smell of this one. I think you'll have enough rugs here.' He got up to leave. 'Doctor, perhaps we could leave the two girls? I think we may need to discuss certain things.'

Chulainn stood outside the tent and waited for the small man with the penetrating eyes and the tired, lined face. He heard the man's voice soothing the girl and then he came out.

'I must check the horses. Come with me.'

'Chulainn, may I ask a favour of you?'

'Of Course, Doctor. I am the leader of the Clyr and so I am the man most able to grant you a favour.'

'It's Ace. I'm worried about her.'

'Ah, Ace!' Chulainn thought it a strange name, but she could, of course, take the name of a clan if it became necessary.

'Yes, she would be horrified to hear me say this, but I think that this journey may become too dangerous for her. Now that I've seen these demons - their ferocious animal power, the malignancy intrinsic in them - I don't think I can justify taking Ace with me when there is a

safer option for her.'

'I understand this. You want her to come with me.'

'Yes, but she isn't likely to want to go with you.'

'Can you not tell her, order her?' Chulainn thought the Doctor must be a weak man if he could not control his womenfolk.

'I'm afraid Ace isn't one to listen to commands. So if I just slip away before she awakes tomorrow morning … ?'

'There will be a horse prepared for you.'

'Thank you, Chulainn.'

'And now, Doctor, you can do a favour for me. Tell me about Earth, tell me all about it. '

Bathsheba awoke in the darkness - something was wrong. When she had last looked the Doctor had been sitting atop the pile of rugs reading a book by the light of a small burning stick. But now, even though it was dark, she could sense that he was no longer there. She felt that he was still near and so she got up.

Ace was still lying asleep. Bathsheba trod carefully as she left the tent.

A light was burning over where the horses were corralled. Bathsheba limped over in that direction because something told her that was where the Doctor was. He couldn't be leaving, not leaving her. She had known, ever since he had called her by the same name that Rush had used, that she must stay by him, that he would lead her out of the nightmare that this world had become. Why was he leaving so secretly?

She peered into the enclosure. The Doctor was sitting atop a magnificent black horse with a pack of supplies slung over its back. He was gazing over towards the tent where Ace lay. Suddenly the horse began to walk towards the gate. A solitary figure let the Doctor's horse out and then vanished away to his bed.

Bathsheba snuffled to herself and sank down against the fence. She found herself looking amongst the forest of horses' legs, lit from overhead by the swinging lantern. And there, lost amongst the treelike legs, was a midget – a midget horse. Bathsheba gasped. This was her chance.

She crawled under the fence and wormed her way through the massive bodies towards the dwarfling pony. She scooped up a handful of straw and offered it to the pony. It munched on the dried grass speculatively and didn't resist when Bathsheba flopped over it and tried to pull herself on. It was a struggle, but eventually she was aboard. She knotted her hand into the pony's mane and then nudged it forward. It worked its way to the gate and nudged it forward.- luckily the gatesman hadn't been terribly conscientious. Bathsheba felt glad that she was able to secure the gate properly behind her. She didn't

want the Clyr's horses to escape.

She still seemed to be able to sense that the Doctor was moving slowly and so she kicked the pony into the equivalent of a gallop. It was a bouncy ride for someone unused to riding but it paid dividends, for she soon caught up with the Doctor. But she hung back, afraid that he would return her to Chulainn's people.

And the night moved on.

'Professor?' Ace called out. 'Professor where are you?' She stood outside the tent and looked around. A sleepy figure emerged from a nearby tent and looked at her blearily.

'What are you shouting about?' it asked, 'Oh, you're the girl we rescued *last* night. Thought Chulainn had been hiding you away from us. I'm Baddawd. Can you keep the noise down, *please?'* He retreated back into his tent.

Ace saw another figure standing under a flaming torch at the far side of the camp. She hurried over to it. It was Chulainn. 'Chulainn, where's the Doctor?'

Chulainn put a hand on Ace's *shoulder.* 'He asked me to tell you, Ace, that ...'

'He's gone, hasn't he? He's *left* me here. I knew it, I knew it.'

'Ace, he did it because he was worried about you.'

'I'll have to go after him. '

'What?'

'I'll have to go after him, of course.'

Chulainn grabbed *hold* of her arm.

'Get off me!'

'Now listen, Ace. The Doctor *left* you so that he could go and see Goibhnie. He thought that it'd be too dangerous for you.'

'Oh yeah, so why'd he take Bathsheba with him?' She shook him off and ran over to her tent. She snatched up her rucksack and her jacket. Chulainn was waiting outside for her.

'Ace, you're my responsibility. I can't *let* you go.'

'Bog off!' She pushed past him and ran out of the camp.

Chulainn cursed her and the promise he had made to the Doctor. He *wheeled* round and went through the camp to find his deputy. He didn't bother *looking* in the man's tent, but went instead to what had been his own tent. He entered quietly, with reverence, as one should when one stood in the presence of the Land Mother. *Glyn* was kneeling by his wife, clutching tightly on to her hand.

'Glyn, my brother,' Chulainn *called* him *softly.* Glyn turned his head towards his *clan* chief.

'Yes, my *lord?'*

'The girl, Ace, who we rescued from that foul creature last night,

has gone searching for her companion, the Doctor. I made a promise *last* night that we would *look* after her, so I must follow her and bring her back. I will not be gone *long* and will be here to give the child its oath.'

'Very good, my lord.'

'How is she?'

Glyn stood and quietly spoke to Chulainn. 'It is difficult. Her endurance is being tested to the limit.'

'It will be a strong child then,' Chulainn reassured him and then turned to leave. 'Keep Arawn from this tent.'

'Dagda is with you,' Glyn responded

Chulainn left the tent and murmur to himself 'And with you, my friend.' He ran over to the corral, leapt onto his stallion and with a few words had it running and jumping over the gate. He pulled the stallion up short and snatched the swinging lantern – it was dark out on the plain.

He took the horse round the camp until he came across Ace's tracks and then he set out along them.

'Ace!' he called, 'Ace!'

He expected to come across her almost immediately, but from her tracks he could tell that she was running and at some speed.

Ace felt angry with the Doctor. She'd never bottled out of anything before so why would he try to leave her behind this time? As her rage grew, something within her grew also. When she had been transported to the planet of the Cat People her mind and body had been influenced by the strange forces at work there. She had thought that the change had been only temporary, but the seed still seemed to be inside her. The sense of the hunt, the hunt for the Doctor, haunted her mind and her body altered subtly, accommodating itself to the greater turn of speed she required. The darkness around her grew vivid with her changed perceptions and she let out a cry of joy. She liked feeling this way and so long as she remained in control it was alright.

Chulainn swore savagely and turned his horse. In the gloom he had missed the trail again. H cast around until he had relocated it and then continued his pursuit. That was the second time - the girl was moving unbelievably fast. He kicked the stallion to a faster gallop.

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Ace heard the hoofbeats coming up behind her and tried to accelerate. Her nervous system toned itself up, reducing the blood supply to her stomach, increasing it to her muscles; her pupils dilated and her mouth went suddenly dry. But it was no good - her pursuer was going to catch her and she would have to turn and fight.

She shook the thought from her mind. She had almost let it slip then. Her head rapidly became clear.

Acknowledging that she was caught she drew to a halt and waited for the rider to appear.

'Ace! Thank Dagda I've caught you. Did you really think you'd be able to find the Doctor in this?'

'I could have if I'd tried.'

'Don't be a fool. You'd have been left wandering around here until a demon found you. Now get on my horse.' He extended a hand to pull her up.

'You're right, I suppose,' Ace admitted. 'But it doesn't matter, anyway. The Doctor didn't leave me behind to be safe. He left me because there's something he needs me to do.' She allowed herself to be pulled on to the horse.

'Whatever you say, Ace. Either way, you're lucky I found you.' He turned the horse and set off back to the camp.

The Doctor brought his horse to a halt between two hills. The lee side of the western hill was clear of snow and so he allowed the mare to graze the frost-rimed grass. He took the blanket off its back and a small cloud of steam drifted off its skin. The Doctor held up his lantern and looked around. Marks in the mud caught his attention. He knelt down by them, not that he needed to identify what had caused them.

They were tyremarks, the same as those he and Ace had seen by the stone circle and in Dinorben.

Somebody had driven by this place in a car. He couldn't say how recently they had been made - the ground had frozen solid and so hadn't changed for some days. The Doctor gave a shrug; it was just another thing to take into account. He left the tyre tracks, sank into the lotus position beside the quietly munching horse and collected his far-flung thoughts together.

After a time a noise impinged on his meditation and he lifted one eyelid to see what he could see. A small skewbald pony was hoving into view from behind the foot of the hill. A figure was slumped across it, apparently asleep. The Doctor gave a sigh and eased himself up. He patted his mare on its near-side flank and strolled over to the now ambling pony. It stopped and gazed at him. The Doctor tapped the small figure on her shoulder.

'Bats,' he said, 'whatever are you doing? Why can't humans stay put when you want them to?'

Sleep-ruled eyes peered mistily at him.

'I can't really take you back to Chulainn, can I? I suppose you'll have to come with me.'

Bathsheba smiled weakly and then collapsed back into her dreams.

A sudden roaring like thunder surrounded Chulainn and Ace.

'By all that's ... The horses, they're stampeding,' Chulainn identified

the noise. Panic filled his voice.

'Something must have happened back at the camp.' He gave a wide cry that the horse seemed to respond to, for it increased its pace, dodging the hurtling bodies of its companions.

A dull, orange glow hung in the air to the south. It couldn't be produced by a single fire, Ace thought, the whole camp must be ablaze. 'By Dagda,' she heard Chulainn whisper behind her.

By the time they reached the encampment, it was already far late. Nothing had been left alive. Every man, woman and child had been slaughtered, their bodies mangled horribly and strewn about the wrecked tents. The melting snow was stained red by the bloodshed. Scattered fires, already dying down, crackled where tents had collapsed on to burning lanterns. The body of a demon, seemingly the only casualty on the attackers' side, lay on the outskirts of the camp.

Chulainn picked through the wreckage, his face salty with tears. Ace followed him, her mind numb with horror. At the centre of the camp lay the bodies of the two pregnant women. Their bellies had been slit open and the babies plucked out and then strangled with their own umbilical cords. Ace left Chulainn and vomited bile on to a still clean patch of ground. Then she went and stood by the horse, looking into the dark. She began to cry.

Behind her she heard Chulainn raise a cry to the heavens. She couldn't bring herself to turn and look.

Moments later Chulainn's hand fell on her shoulder. His voice was dead.

'All have been slain. I must honour them. Will you help me?'

'What do you want me to do?' she asked.

'I must build a pyre. Burn their bodies. They cannot be left to scavengers. I realize you may be unused to such an ... an atrocity, but if you collect materials for burning, I will gather together the corpses. They are my people in death as much as they were in life. '

'All right, I'll do that.'

They set about the grisly task with heavy hearts. Was this the Doctor's idea of committing her into safe hands? When Chulainn announced that it was finished, Ace looked with some surprise at the camp.

'But there are still people left.'

'They are not people, they were witches. They were part of the demon attack. I shall not contaminate my people's purifying flames by burning those scum with them.'

He set a flaming torch against the pyre and stood back as it flared up into life. He gazed into the flames until everything was consumed and then turned.

'I have gathered together enough supplies for our journey back to

Dinorben. Come, it is time we left this place of death.'

They halted for the night on the outskirts of the Forest of Coed. Chulainn had decided not to take the road through the middle of the forest and had instead tracked along the outermost western edges, hoping to avoid the obvious danger of ambushes. When they stopped they penetrated a few hundred yards into the forest to remove themselves from the dangerous open.

Chulainn lit a fire and then piled stones around its edge so that its light was contained. He boiled up some water and then vanished into the trees for a few minutes, returning with a bird that looked as though it might have had grouse in its ancestry. They cooked it over the fire and then picked at the small amount of tasteless flesh.

When they had finished eating, they sat and faced each other across the fire.

'What are witches?' Ace asked. 'I mean, to me witches are old biddies who fly around on broomsticks wearing pointy black hats. I don't think that's what they are to you. Those people at the camp looked the same as anyone else. How could you tell they were witches?'

'Ace,' Chulainn said, 'I would rather not talk about the camp. But witches, witches are easy to recognize. There are five races who inhabit Tír na n-Óg. There are the humans, the Fomoir, the Sidhe, the Firbolg and the Ceffyl. All but the humans bear a mark upon their bodies. A small triangular mark whose points are surmounted by small shapes. As I said, all but the humans bear this mark, but there are some humans who do carry the mark. They are full of evil and malice and hatred for true humans. There are the witches.'

'And where do you look for this mark?'

'It is invariably behind the ear, on the nape of the neck.'

'And that's how you recognize them?'

'There are other ways: In some it is possible to see it in their eyes.'

'The eyes are the window on the soul.'

'What?'

'Something I read, I think.'

'Ah! Others, the worst cases, are able to shift their forms.'

'Werewolves! Ace!'

'Witches, quasi-demons. Please, I'd rather not talk about it any longer.'

'Right.' There was silence for a few minutes. Ace looked at the stones around the fire; one of them was beginning to glow dimly. 'When we met you, you said you were the leader of your clan and something else.'

'Guardian of the virginity of Brigit. '

'That's it! Who's Brigit?'

‘Brigit is one of the original Tuatha. One of our goddesses. The goddess of poetry and fire.’

'Poetry?'

'Yes. To become clan leader I had to demonstrate my ability to control fire and to compose poetry.’

'How did you do that? ‘

‘Grasping burning coals in my hands, walking over hot ashes and other tests.’

'Wicked! And the poetry?'

Chulainn's chest swelled with pride. 'I am the best in the clan.

Listen: -

'And Dianecht comes to the river

He saw that there were many of the Lugh there

With the fire of Rhyl in their bellies

They wield swords of blazing virtue

Take from the castle that is built by the Tuatha

Out of rock of ages. '

He paused and looked to Ace whose eyes had grown wide during this recitation. She realized that some comment was expected of her and so she started to nod her head vigorously. This obviously wasn't quite enough, so she said, 'Yes, very good! And you're the best in your clan, right? Phew, some competition. No, it's all right,' she waved him down, 'there’s only so much culture I can take in one night.'

Ace curled up inside her sleeping bag, bringing her knees up close to her chest to keep herself warm.

The method worked because soon she found herself dreaming. She was lying in a boat, drifting slowly down a river. The sun was dancing on the water casting reflective ripples up on to the green canopy. She dangled her fingers into the cool water and revelled in the warmth of the sun upon her body. An orchestra struck up in the background and she gave a casual wave to them where they floated by on an enormous water lily. Simon Groom, a childhood crush, kissed her gently on her forehead and then dragged his enormous, rough tongue across her cheek. She spluttered awake.

The sky had cleared enough for some starlight to filter through, but a large section of the sky was cut off by a huge silhouette. It muzzled her cheek again.

'Chulainn,' she called out, about to tell him that his horse had slipped its rope, but something stopped her. There was a soft but sharp touch against her forehead and suddenly a voice appeared in her head and a soft nimbus surrounded the creature that loomed over her. On first sight it appeared to be a horse but it was something more. Its outline shone as though it was a cloud concealing the sun

and deep within it starlight danced. An overwhelming sensation of goodness seemed to flow from the tip of its horn, still pressed against her skin and suffused her body with pleasure. When the voice spoke inside her head it was the voice of an angel, or a lover, soft and caressing.

'Greetings Ace.'

'How do you know my name? What are you? Are you a unicorn?'

'I am called Bat. I am one of the Ceffyl.'

'You are a unicorn!'

'Get away from her!'

The unicorn's head whipped up and it turned its kind eyes on Chulainn. He had snatched up his scabbard and now pulled out his sword.'

'Get away from her, Ceffyl!' Chulainn used the word as an insult.

'Tell him there are demons coming.'

'She says there are demons coming.' Ace told Chulainn.

'Led here by the Ceffyl, no doubt.' He raised his sword to strike at the unicorn.

Ace moved so that she was between Chulainn and Bat.

'I have come to offer the protection of the herd for your journey back to Dinorben.'

'She says that we can journey with her herd back to Dinorben.'

'Never! Consort with demon spawn, never!'

The unicorn's voice was as mild as ever. Ace wondered if this was entirely due to it being only a voice in her mind.

'Ace, what about you? Will you return with the herd?'

Ace looked at Chulainn, his prejudices against this beautiful creature fully revealed.

'I'm going with Bat,' she told him.

'No Ace. I made a promise to the Doctor.' He dropped his sword and took hold of her arm. She shook his hand off.

'Well, I didn't!' she told him. She picked up her sleeping bag and stuffed it into her rucksack. She climbed on to Bat's back.

'Tell him again that there are demons coming this way,' Bat asked her.

Ace told Chulainn, 'She says that there are definitely demons coming.'

'Ha!'

Bat began to move. Ace turned to look at Chulainn, standing amongst the trees. Suddenly her vision blurred and her head was jolted forwards as Bat gathered speed.

'I'm sorry Chulainn,' she whispered. 'Goodbye.'

9:

Rissole Time

Old Davy paused in his climb up the hill from the Black Swan and took a few breaths of the Welsh air.

He sucked it in between his teeth, let it play momentarily over his tongue and then drank it into his lungs. Having carried its burden to the delicate exchange membranes, it swirled out again in dizzying whirlwinds.

He lifted his head to look at the house, white with moonlight, that he had occupied for most of his natural life. For the first time in nearly fifty years his head reeled. Something had changed, something major, something fundamental in his life. The wall of his cottage had collapsed. Old Davy almost ran up the remaining few yards of the path and gazed with dismay at the ruins of the wall. There was no doubt about it - the supporting stone had been pulled out and the rest of the structure left to fall down. He realized now what the marks on the path had been.

He had built the wall out of rocks dug up from a field that needed ploughing. The largest, the one that had been stolen, had been the inspiration. It might have been smashed up and used as gravel, but something about the markings on its surface made Old Davy want to preserve it - and so the wall had been born.

He let the dust shaken from the rafters of his brain settle and then he gave a small shrug. It was only a wall after all, just a collection of miscellaneous stones. It may have had some value to him because he had made it but nothing more. He only hoped the thieves had left his house intact.

Confident that there was no one still present, Old Davy pottered up to his house and pushed open the permanently unlocked front door. Inside, the house was unlit. Nor did it need any illumination, for he knew every inch of it. He wandered into his bedroom, switched on the bedside lamp for reassurance, and looked at his other treasure possessions. They were all there, leaning against each other on the tiny shelf that clung precariously to the plastered wall. Signed copies of books that he had taken in lieu of payment for some milk from a pair of foreigners who had stopped briefly in the valley. They were the only books he ever read now. They formed a series that told the story of a journey there and back again. They were tales of wonder, tales of mystical lands.

And in a strange way, Old Davy believed in them.

'Any luck?' Jack asked Stevens who had just appeared over the bonnet of the car. Jack had woken that morning wondering where he

was. Going from a tent to a hotel room to a completely different hotel room made for confusing awakenings. He'd got up and found a message pinned to his door. Stevens had left early to pursue enquiries about the yellow van, to try to track down the missing vet and to continue his search for the origin of the people who had been killed in the coach accident. He's arranged that he and Jack should meet in Gwydyr or, alternatively, back at the Black Swan.

Jack, after wandering around the roads, had opted to meet Stevens in Gwydyr as that was where he happened to be at the specified time. On an impulse, he had gone down the road that led to the metal gates, because he had thought that maybe they could conceal a breeding ground for monsters; the raggedness of the warning signs had convinced him that this couldn't be the government research centre that Hughes, the policeman , had mentioned. So, still looking for the stones, or any sign of David, he had made his way to Gwydyr. That was why he was sitting, slumped by his rucksack, against Steven's car.

'Nothing,' said Stevens. 'I think I may be wasting my time up here.'

'How can you say that?' asked Jack. 'You've seen a unicorn haven't you?'

'Maybe. That reminds me, I'm not holding out much hope, but I'd like you to at least show me the place where you found the centaur.' He shook his head at Jack's assumption. 'No, what I meant was I came up here because of something I call my "Un-missing People" file.'

'Oh, yeah.' Jack's enthusiasm was bridled. 'I don't suppose you found any trace of David. '

'No, and the police here are being as unhelpful as they possibly can be. I don't think they like me.

Well, get in.' He unlocked the passenger door.

'We've got to do something for David,' Jack said, sliding in. 'I mean, I'd sort of hoped for lines of policemen beating their way through the undergrowth, but it's as if we were both just non-persons.

Nobody will pay any attention to me.'

'I listened.'

'Oh, and that did a lot of good.'

'Don't blame me.' Although it was true, it didn't do Stevens's pride any good to be told the truth.

'Why the heck not? You're a bloody policeman, aren't you? And you can't do diddly-squat!'

It was true, Stevens thought. There was absolutely nothing he could do. When people in authority start to gang up on you then you're up a creek without a paddle. By rights there should be people out looking for David, but there weren't; there should have been a public outcry about the burning of the centaur, but there wasn't. In

short, he was about as much use here as a chocolate kettle.

'Pull over here,' said Jack, after a while. 'The centaur's down there.'

They got out and went down the stream. As they had expected there was nothing to see and it was beginning to get dark. Stevens knelt in the mud, looking for some indication that something had happened there. He sniffed. There was a faint smell of petrol in the air. Well, that was something, at least.

'How come that smell's still there?' Jack asked. 'I mean, it's been two days now.' The breeze caught at his hair and blew his fringe into his eyes.

'Christ, that isn't from two days ago!' Stevens exclaimed. 'It's happening again, they're burning something else.' He raised a damp finger in the air and felt the direction of the breeze.

'You're right!' cried Jack. 'Oh, my God! It couldn't be ... *T*

'I hope not. Come on!'

David struggled against his bonds, but succeeded only in grazing the backs of his hands against the rough, dark granite of the stone pillar and in making the ropes dig even tighter into his wrists. The circle of men, clothed in white robes, took another step closer and resumed their chant a third time. David was terrified that, at the next step, they would be close enough for one of them to reach down and apply a torch to the pile of dry wood around his feet.

He'd already tried reasoning with them. As he had lain, barely conscious, in the darkness of what seemed to be a broom cupboard, he had heard them discussing what was to happen to him. At the first chance that had presented itself, he had spoken to one of his captors.

'You can't burn me!' he had said. 'This is England, isn't it? You don't burn people in England!'

'No, boyo,' the masked figure had replied, 'this isn't England and nor is it Wales. This is a little extension of the old world. Our families may not have lived there for a hundred years, but we still remember the traditions. And even though their so-called guardian of the stones won't help us, we know what to the likes of you. '

'Hey, come on!' David tried to put a bit of levity into his voice. 'Surely you can't hate Americans that much.'

'American, English, French, Welsh. That's of no importance,' the man spat. 'You're a witch!'

Jack and Inspector Stevens ran and slithered down the gully in the hillside. Its sides fell away and now carried along with the smell they heard voices chanting.

'Down here!' Jack took off away from the stream, heading towards the trees at the bottom of the valley.

The chanting grew louder, and there were points of fire dancing

amongst the trees. Stevens and Jack dodged between them and Jack began to yell like fury. Stevens imitated him; it looked like there were ten people there and it would take a lot of noise for them to be intimidated by two.

But the chanting faltered and Stevens heard voices raised in query. And then the torchlights scattered.

They caught glimpses of white robes dashing amongst the trees. When they burst into the clearing, there was only one of the white figures remaining, clutching a torch. And tied to a stone post was David.

‘Jack,’ he shouted, relieved to see his friend. The person in the white robe looked around in desperation and then flung his torch at the wood piled around David’s feet. It roared into flames.

‘Oh my God, Jack!’ David shouted. 'Get me out of here!’

Jack rushed forward to free him and the lingerer took the opportunity to escape. Steven’s lumbering run brought him into the clearing just too late to fling himself at the absconding figure – but he did it anyway.

'David, it's good to see you,’ Jack said.

‘You too, Jack. I thought it was rissole time for me. Who's your friend?’

Stevens levered himself up on one elbow. ‘Stevens of the Yard at your service. You would be David Gibson, I take it? Your foot is on fire by the way.’

David beat his foot on the ground until the flames died down.

'Who were those weirdos, David?' Jack's face was a picture of happiness 'What happened to you?'

‘God knows, I’ve been out of it for twenty-four hours.’

'Would you recognize any of your assailants?' asked Stevens.

'You bet.' David nodded vigorously. 'You don't forget people like that.’

'Right then, I’ll drop you two off at the Swan and then I'll go and fetch the village policeman. He'll have to do something now.’

'But he's mixed up in all this ' Jack protested.

'Maybe' Stevens agreed: but there was some doubt in his voice. He was used to policemen going out of their way to obstruct him. ‘Anyway, I’ll need him if I’m to get the police at Gwydyr to do anything.’

‘Sounds good to me,’ said David.

‘But do you know why they wanted to burn you?’ Jack asked.

‘Well,’ said David, ‘I’m not sure … but I think it may have more than a little to do with this.’ And pulling his hair to one side, he showed them his birthmark.

‘You again!’ Hughes sounded annoyed this time. Stevens noticed

the sweat that was standing out in beads upon the constable's forehead.

'I want you to come down to the Black Swan and take a statement off one of those young American lads.'

Hughes turned and went through into his kitchen. Stevens used this as an invitation to come in.

'What is it this time? Have they come across little green men from Mars? Crop circles?'

Stevens had had quite enough of the constable's insubordination. 'Don't push your luck, man. Your friends may have told you that I haven't any power, but I can still get you suspended from duty.'

Hughes refused to look chagrined, but Stevens continued. 'Now then, I told you yesterday that one of them had been kidnapped. Well, he has been found again and wishes to make a statement which needs you to be present as a witness.

'Listen, I've got better things to do than chase your imagination. '

Stevens felt his face fill with blood. 'I don't know exactly why you're being so obstructive, Hughes, but you will be pleased to know that the lad's complaint is against people, real people who kidnapped him and then tried to burn him to death in some sort of ritual. Will that satisfy you?'

'Oh all right, damn you. If it will stop you pestering me, I'll take your bloody statement and I'll even bloody well send it over to the station at Gwydyr. Satisfied, boyo?'

'Perfectly. If you could only have been so helpful before.'

'Well, just hold on, I'll have to put my uniform on.' Hughes left the kitchen and Stevens heard him rummaging around in the next room. He wandered out into the hall and stood waiting. At last he had got some action, and about time too. What was the point in being a ranking police officer if nobody in the force took any notice of what you wanted doing?

Idly he looked at the ornaments which adorned a small ledge running along the wall. A china cat from Rhyl, a model of the Eiffel Tower, a squat red dragon and what appeared to be a stuffed piranha fish. His eyes roved along the wall and then for some reason he pushed open the door to the front room.

All he saw was the chair in the corner, but at that moment Hughes emerged from the bedroom. He looked at Stevens suspiciously.

'Well, come on then, boyo, if we must go.' He ushered Stevens out of the front door ahead of him and turned out the lights before following.

As Stevens got into his car he tried to think of just one reason why Constable Hughes could possibly need as much white hessian as he

had seen draped over the arm of the chair in the front room. It wasn't difficult.

When he had finished noting down David's statement, Hughes sat back and grinned. 'Well, at least we know what happened to Gerwyn Jones's van now.'

'What?' asked Sevens.

'Stolen a couple of days ago. Matches the description given by Mr Gibson. That'll give us something to go on.'

'You're saying that the van was stolen.'

' 'Fraid so, boyo. I ought to go and check up on this stone post that you were tied to. And I'll take this statement over to Gwydyr, they'll type it out and I'll get it back to you for signing. That's just about everything, I think.'

'What about identikits?' Jack asked. 'David says he could identify some of his assailants.'

'Don't have those here, sir.'

'Well, over at Gwydyr then,' Stevens suggested.

'It's late, boyo. Take the lad over in the morning. I'll be off now.'

'Wait a moment,' said Jack. 'I want to make a statement as well.'

'That so?', Hughes asked resignedly.

'Yeah, about the centaur You remember – the one you burnt?'

'Lost me there, boyo. Don't know what you re talking about.'

'Come off it.'

'Inspector, I said I'd only take this lad's statement if there wasn't any of this loony stuff. I'll be off now.' He got up and left the pub.

'He's mixed up in all this,' said David.

'You're not kidding. Up to his elbows,' Jack agreed.

Stevens nodded. "There's no doubt about it. If it wasn't for the way he denied knowing about the centaur, or his lies about the van, then the *white* robe in his living room would point unerringly in *that* direction.'

What? He was one of them?'

'That s *what* I said.'

'So what do we do?'

'Well, for one thing we make sure that that statement reaches Gwydyr. Without any mention of centaurs it should be taken seriously. Secondly, I think that you should call the American embassy in London, get them to do something on your behalf. But make sure that you don't mention my name. If Scotland Yard realize that I've got anything to do with you then they'll ignore it sure as eggs is eggs.

Thirdly, I think I should get in touch with my office and try to dig up some facts. Finally, and most importantly, I think we should all get something to eat.

10:

Many Meetings

Wake up, Bathsheba,' the Doctor urged the young girl gently, ‘it’s time we set off again.'

Bathsheba shivered into wakefulness. 'My arm,' she said, 'it hurts.'

The Doctor took it in his hands and rubbed it soothingly, willing the blood to flow to her atrophied muscles. 'Is that better?'

‘Yes, it feels better now. Thank you.' She stood and walked over to her small horse which was lying against the side of the Doctor's mare.

'Hello, Bychan. Get up now, it's time to go.'

The pony looked up at her and then pushed itself up with its forelegs. It nuzzled her side as she struggled to climb on to its back.

‘I think we should follow these tyre tracks if we can,' the Doctor told her. She nodded.

'Why?' she asked.

'If there is someone from Earth here then I think I should I find him or her. Or them. Are you ready?'

'Yes, Doctor.'

They set off, the Doctor in front, and slipped out of the shelter of the hills and back on to the exposed plain. Bathsheba found it was increasingly difficult to distinguish the tracks from the surrounding landscape. Snow was continuing to fall and was smothering all detail. But the Doctor seemed to know where he was going and Bathsheba was satisfied with that.

She had great faith in the Doctor - he seemed like someone she could believe in. She had believed in other people: her father and David, before the accident which had taken them away from her in different ways; Herne, whom she had heard spoken of with respect because of what he could do for crops which were failing; Goibhnie, whom she still believed in, who would be able to help her when she eventually met him. She need so badly to believe that there was someone in the world who could cure her of her withered arm and could assure her that she wasn’t cursed. She had seen her brother killed by the hooves of beasts, her father had been killed by the claws and teeth of demons, and .Herne, by his own words, had left her nothing to believe in him for. The Doctor hadn't promised anything but he offered security in a harsh world and he was taking her to Goibhnie.

The plain began to be rolled up into undulating folds and the going became more and more harsh for the horses. Again and again there would be the tiresome climb through the snow up to a ridge where the wind would whip them with thongs of snow crystals. Then there was

the tumbling descent through the heaped snow to the meagre refuge offered in between the folds. Even numbed by the cold, Bathsheba could feel the fatigue that her steed was suffering from. She began to long for the Doctor to bring the ride to a halt, but she could see that it was impossible - at the moment there was nowhere to shelter nothing that would shield them from the weather. She realized that the Doctor could no longer be following the tracks and she even started to wonder if he actually knew where he was going. Finally he wheeled his horse round and called to her to stop.

Are you all right?' he asked.

'It's so cold,' she complained. He searched in the pack slung over his horse's back and handed her a blanket to cover her shoulders. As an afterthought he removed his dark jacket and draped that around her as well. As his hand patted her cheek she compared its ruddy healthiness with the pallor of her skin.

How could he stay warm against the savage cold which chilled her inner core?

'We must go on,' he told her. 'Night is corning. There must be some shelter around. Maybe a farmhouse.'

I hope we find it soon,' Bathsheba said.

'I lost the tracks some time ago, I'm afraid,' the Doctor apologized.

'I thought so.'

They started riding again. At last they came to the end of the hills and the ground dipped away in a long curving sweep. They made the horses tread carefully, for the crust of snow could conceal dangers.

Bathsheba was the first to see the small shed crouching in a hollow in the ground. She called out to the Doctor, not expecting her voice to carry over the noise of the wind, but he turned at her cry and stopped his horse. She waved her arm in the direction of the shed until he saw it. He gave her a nod and they headed off towards the shelter that it might offer.

The shed's door was jammed with snow. The body of a ram lay frozen to the wall. Its eyes were staring and its mouth open in a silent bleat. The Doctor cleared the snow from the door and pulled it open. A fresh animal smell drifted out on a wave of warm air and there was a shuffling sound in the darkness.

Away from the wind, the Doctor was able to light the lantern from his pack. Bathsheba gazed around the interior. Five sheep huddled in one comer as far away from the two intruders as possible; the walls were battered but enough to keep out the worst of the weather; stray scraps of straw littered the floor.

'It may not be much, but it'll do for the night, said the Doctor. 'I've slept in worse places.' He hung the lantern from one of the overhead

beams and led the horses into the shed. Pulling the door shut behind them, he said to Bathsheba, ‘Catabolic processes - they'll keep us warm here. It should at least be bearable.'

They unpacked their blankets and laid them out on the floor. Bathsheba was so weary from the day's travel that she slept immediately. The Doctor checked the animals for any signs of ill health. The horses were fine, Chulainn's people knew how to look after them, but the sheep were undernourished and in poor condition. There was nothing he could do for them except hope that the snows melted in time for them to be able to reach food. He sat with his back against the mare's flank and closed his eyes on the world for a time.

Disturbance in sense organs.

Accommodate for reduced ambient temperature. Fault corrected.

Awaiting instructions.

Active #76/1, #76/2.

Correct muscular spasming.

Activate motive units.

Awaiting instructions.

Appropriate velocity achieved.

Extend #76/1, #76/2.

Scan.

Awaiting instructions.

Every crystal of snow was different, designed by nature from random aggregations of water molecules.

A draughtsman could work for years to produce a single object with as much beauty.

Outside the shed, millions upon millions of intricately constructed snowflakes drifted into wind formed sculptures. They pressed in on the walls of the shed, piling up so that, when the small patrol arrived they had to work to clear away the snow so that they could open the door. Their efforts at digging awoke the Doctor Bathsheba long before they got inside and the sheep began to bleat pathetically.

'Hello in there" a cheerful voice called from the other side of the door. ‘We came across your trail in the snow and thought we had better locate any travellers who might be lost. Hello, can you hear me?’

'Yes,' the Doctor shouted 'We are travelling to Goibhnie’s island. I am the Doctor and I have a young girl here called Bathsheba..'

'Well, then greetings, Doctor and Bathsheba. I am Ferllu of Daffyr. We have rather a lot of snow to clear away from this door. We shan't be long. From your smell you are humans. Are you not taking great risk journeying to Goibhnie? I believed that there was a state of war between yourselves and we other races.’

'I am not a native of *Tír na n-Óg*. I try not to involve myself with your politics but I have been told that I may not return to Dinorben unless I go to treaty with Goibhnie.'

‘The fool Nuada seeks others to do his work, does he?’

'Something like that. Pardon me for asking, but which of the races are you?’

'I am Firbolg,' Ferllu said proudly. ‘My companions are Allan and Chrawd of Daffyr There now, the door is clear. May we enter?’

‘You may indeed,' answered the Doctor. Bathsheba cowered behind him. She had been told that the Fomoir, the Firbolg and the Sidhe were to blame for the loss of Dagda's Wheel from the sky and, despite their pleasant manner, she didn't entirely trust these visitors.

The three Firbolg lowered their heads as they entered the shed. The Doctor gave each a quick bow as they came in and was answered by slight inclinations of their backs. When they were all inside he shut the door. The shed was rather overcrowded now. The Doctor's mare rose and began to sniff at the newcomers.

'So, you journey to Goibhnie. You are not the first.'

'No?' the Doctor asked.

‘No, we have another who has journeyed from the place called Earth, He has been with the herd for two days now. You will meet him.'

'Yes, we'd like that.'

‘You have no choice. You are on our land and so must go before our lord to explain yourselves.'

'But we've explained what we're doing to you,' the Doctor protested.

'Honour demands that you present yourself before our lord. It is only proper.'

'Ah, I see. Because I am on your land it is right and fair that I should meet with your leader. It would be discourteous for me not to do so.'

'For a human you grasp our customs well, Doctor. And if you do not satisfy our lord then you will die.'

Bathsheba gasped in horror.

'Do not worry, little human,' Allan said. 'Our lord is generally easily pleased.'

'Aye, unless he has something on his mind,' agreed Chrawd. 'Of course, he does have something on his mind at the moment.'

'True, true.'

'Gentles,' admonished Ferllu, 'you are frightening the girl. Be so kind as to take these sheep to our flock. They have been abandoned by their human owners and so we may claim them for the while.'

'As you command, good Ferllu.' Allan opened the door and let

Chrawd usher the sheep through. With a wave to Bathsheba he went out and closed the door behind him.

‘If you will gather your packs together, I think we should rejoin the herd as well.’

The Doctor nodded.

'You may ride upon my back,’ Ferllu told Bathsheba kindly.

Bathsheba did not relish the prospect of going out again, but she saw that they had little choice. She gave the Doctor what little help she could and tied the pack across her pony's back. Ferllu lifted her up on to his back and she wrapped his mane around her fingers. In many ways, this Filbolg was not so unlike the Ceffyl that she had befriended. Wistfully, she wondered what had happened to Rush.

The Doctor led the two horses outside and then mounted. Ferllu followed close behind and then took the lead as they rode across the snow The wind was as vicious, as before but the snow was no longer falling. In the east Arawn’s Wheel was creeping over the horizon. It stained the landscape red as though a great and bloody battle had been fought there. The snowfield was as barren as a desert. It stretched away to the horizon on all sides blemished only by the tracks that the travellers left behind them.

Bathsheba yawned and began to slump forward against Ferllu's back. He put one hand behind himself to support her.

At last, in the distant twilight the Doctor picked out the signs of the Firbolg camp. Two guards trotted out to meet them. They carried pikes as tall again as themselves and wore loose-fitting tunics over their bare torsos

‘Hail, soldiers,' Ferllu greeted them. ‘I bring more strangers from the other world.'

'Hail, Ferllu. Do you plan to bring them before our lord immediately?'

‘I see no point in delaying.'

‘Well, he has his feet plunged into the snow at the moment to relieve his pain. Perhaps you would do well to wait.’

'If his discomfort is being assuaged then now would be the best time for an audience.’

‘And I would prefer an immediate audience ' the Doctor spoke up. One of the guards stared at him as though amazed at the audacity of a human speaking up for himself. The Doctor shrugged and added as an explanation, 'We would like to be on our way as soon as possible.'

The guards waved them on and Ferllu led the Doctor into the camp, talking as he went. 'This is the herd of Daffyr. The mountain Firbolg scorn us for our lifestyle. They consider themselves so superior and put on their airs and graces. It is but a sham.’

‘More internal squabbles,' the Doctor commented. 'No good ever

came of them. Tell me about your people, Ferllu.'

'We harvested the shores of Porfa and disdained the stamping ground. As you can see -' he gestured around himself, indicating the tents and people arrayed in much the same way as Chuliann's camp - 'we live much as humans do and until recently we had formed close bonds of friendship with the men of the Clyr. But Chulainn and his like are a fickle lot.'

The camp was built around a small farmhouse which seemed to have been occupied by the lord of the herd, judging by the way everything else centred around it. The house was L-shaped with a small yard in its angle. In the yard stood a large Firbolg. His body was that of a handsome stallion, well built and firmly muscled; the human half, on the other hand, was running to fat. But the face, heavily bearded, had a nobility to it that suggested to the Doctor that this was the herd's lord. He stood splay-legged with snow piled high around his feet. He turned his head at the sound of the approaching party and lifted an arm in welcome.

'Ferllu!'

'My lord, these humans seek an audience with you.'

'I'm not exactly decorously prepared to grant their request, but why stand on ceremony when I'm standing on ice? Present them to me and let them give an account of themselves.'

The Doctor dismounted and helped Bathsheba down from Ferllu's back.

'The man is called the Doctor and the girl is Bathsheba,' Ferllu told his lord. The Doctor bowed deeply at this introduction.

'My lord,' he began, 'we travel to see the one called Goibhnie. I was sent by the Tuatha de Danaan and acquired the company of Bathsheba on the way. I am not one of the men of Tír na n-Óg. but from the place called Earth.'

'What are your reasons for trespassing on the land of Daffyr?' Ferllu asked him.

'Let him speak for himself, Ferllu.'

'We are both strangers in this land and did not realize we were trespassing.'

'Hardly a good enough reason,' the herd lord suggested.

'It is the only defence I can offer,' said the Doctor.

'You're from Earth,' another voice broke in. The Doctor and Bathsheba looked to its source. A young man, wearing clothes that could not have originated in Tír na n-Óg and sporting a mess of brown hair, stood in the doorway of the farmhouse. 'My God, it's a relief to see someone normal at last. I'm Stuart Taylor.' He strode forward, extending his hand ahead of him.

'I'm the Doctor and this is my friend, Bathsheba,' the Doctor answered, accepting the proffered hand of friendship. 'I presume the tyre tracks that we've been following were made by you.

'That's right. Erm, Daffyr?'

'Yes, Stuart. I suppose you want me to allow these two stay?'

'Would you? They are my only contact with home after all.'

'All right. Ferllu, you may go.'

'Yes, my lord. Goodbye, Bathsheba.' He bent and kissed her on her forehead. 'Goodbye, Doctor. ' He turned and trotted off into the camp.

'Take them inside: then, Stuart. I'll join you shortly.'

The man led them into the farmhouse kitchen where a warm fire burned brightly. 'We're running low on fuel but we should be moving on soon, so I'm using up what's left. Sit down I'll get you something to drink. No tea, sorry.'

Bathsheba sat down at the long trestle table with some bemusement. The Doctor wandered around the room examining its contents closely. He gratefully accepted the warming drink that the man provided and then sat down as they exchanged the stories of how they had come to this place.

Stuart explained to the Doctor and Bathsheba that he was vet, though he had to explain to Bathsheba what a vet was. He began by telling them of the day he had found the unicorn's horn.

After he had finished his rounds for the day, he had returned home. Lazily he had thrown something into the microwave and then sat in front of the television for the evening. Swept on a wave of droning voices and bright colours, he had drifted into sleep, but had been woken by the insistent white noise of the television asking to be turned off. He had stumbled up to bed, slipped in between the sheets and had a strangely vivid dream. At least, he had supposed it to be a dream at first.

The light of the rising sun had prompted him to rise from his bed - or was it the calling in his mind?

He had dressed, gone down to his car and got in. But instead of driving to his surgery, he had taken the road out of Gwydyr towards Llanfer Ceiriog. And then the calling had made him drive down the road that led north out of the village. The road ended at a pair of metal gates which were padlocked shut. He had used his hoof-cutters to break the chain that secured the gates and had then driven through. The road converted to a track once through the gates and he had put his foot down on the accelerator. He had been rather lucky that when he had reached the stone circle he hadn't done his car any damage. But he didn't have long to think about that, for he suddenly found himself transported to the land of Tír na n-Óg, The guards around the circle hadn't been able to stop him, but the gates of Dinorben had. He

had had to get out of the car and had been captured by the soldiers who had taken him before the Tuatha de Danaan. At this point, General Nuada had searched him and found the unicorn horn in his pocket. As soon as the horn was confiscated, Stuart's dream-like state had vanished and he had found himself plunged headfirst back into reality.

He had been given the same choice as the Doctor and Ace, which is to say that he had been given no choice at all. At noon the next day, he had driven out of Dinorben and had taken a rather circuitous route across Tír na n-Óg. He hadn't encountered any difficulties until he had come across the herd of Daffyr .

He had been brought before Daffyr in much the same way as they had and had almost been put to death for trespassing on the land. But he had noticed that Daffyr was walking badly and had been able to diagnose laminitis ('It's when the laminae of the hoof get inflamed,' he explained to Bathsheba - she looked blank and he simplified to, 'something wrong with a horse's feet'). He had been able to relieve some of Daffyr's suffering by bleeding off a couple of pints of blood. He injected some antibiotics ('never mind,' he said to Bathsheba.) and told. Daffyr that he would have to spend a couple of hours a day with his feet kept cold and with luck the problem would be cured over the course of a few weeks ....

'It's going well so far,' said Stuart, 'so Daffyr is grateful to me. I suppose that's why he let you two live.'

'The treatment's a bit primitive, isn't it?' the Doctor asked.

'Yes, well, the people at Dinorben took a lot of my stuff so I couldn't do any better.'

'And now?'

'What do you mean?'

The Doctor placed his mug on the table. 'What do you plan to do now?'

'I hadn't really thought about it,' Stuart shrugged. 'I suppose I just intended to stick around until I could come up with some way of getting back to Earth.'

'Is your car still in working order?'

'Yes. I'm running a bit low on petrol, but there's enough to get me back to Dinorben.'

'Good. It'll do.'

'Do for what?' asked Bathsheba.

'Yes, Doctor, do for what?'

The Doctor smiled and his dark eyes sparkled. 'Why, for the last approach to Goibhnie.'

There were thirty-three Ceffyl in the herd that Ace had joined. They were without a herd stallion for the moment the only male being

a young colt: Leaderless, they had no course of action in mind beyond going to Dinorben to help the situation there. Ace rode on Bat's back, because through Bat she co communicate with the other members of the herd.

The horn of a Ceffyl was a very special thing. It was a direct extension of their brain outside the cranium and contained everything that distinguished a Ceffyl from an ordinary horse. By touching her horn to Ace's. forehead,. Bat had bestowed a great gift which could only be given once in a Ceffyl s lifetime, a link was forged between the two of them which could not be broken.

'It affects different people in different ways, Bat explained to Ace as they galloped across the semicultivated fields. *'My dam, Rush, gave her gift to a young girl human. In her case, it only gave her the ability to talk to Rush. But you have also received the gift of seeing my aura, so you can see how I feel by the way the light plays around me.'*

Ace thought about this for a time and then told Bat, 'But in all the time I've been with you, the aura has been white light. It hasn't changed at all. Except perhaps in its brightness.'

'That is because I have been happy to be with you. When I gallop, my aura is *brighter because I enjoy the freedom to run. When I lie down, I am happy because my muscles are tired from too much galloping. When I talk with you, I am happy because you are my bond-mate.'*

'You make life sound so simple.'

Bat gave a sort of psychic shrug. *'Perhaps I should not. Life is not simple. When we reach Dinorben we will discover how complicated life* is. *For more than three centuries we have been at peace with humans. Now, because of what they call Arawn 's Wheel, we are no longer at peace. There s~ an explanation for this - - I believe it* is *called human logicality.* They *say that if we escape to Earth, they will be prevented from escaping to Earth as well. I do not follow their reasoning.'*

'They think that the humans on Earth won't notice a few tens of thousands of extra people, but if unicorns and centaurs start to appear then they'll have to take notice. And the Earth people might stop the Tír na n-Óg people from escaping from the danger here.'

'Has anyone tested this theory?'

'Well, I once saw someone on the television saying that nobody likes a refugee. The people whom the refugees are trying to get away from don't like them and the people whom the refugees go to for shelter don't want them: So the best way for a refugee to get into a country is by not letting the country know that they're coming in. That's what's happening here. Does this make sense?'

'Yes and no. I can follow your words, but I cannot understand the meanings underlying the words.

The concepts are very humanish. '

'Don't worry, I've always thought it was so much clap-trap. Perhaps if we could get you lot on to Earth then we could show the Tuatha that there's nothing to worry about.'

'But how could we get through their defences? And what if *there was something to worry about?'*

'Well, I've been thinking about it. The main problem here is that there are these demons gradually killing everyone, right, and that's what the humans are trying to get away from.'

Bat didn't say anything so Ace carried on.

'Well, the way I see it is that if you lot turn up on Earth the government will have to take notice. And if the Tuatha get together with the government, because they've had to admit that something is going on because of you lot, then the government will be able to supply them with superior firepower to wipe out the demons.' She gave a nod of her head - the logic seemed impeccable to her.

'I will convey your suggestion to the rest of the herd. But there is still the problem of how to get into Dinorben. '

Ace tightened the straps of her rucksack and felt the weight of the deodorant cans nestling safely within. 'Well, I've got a couple of ideas for that,' she said.

Bat called the herd to form a quorum. They sent one of the younger fillies to locate a touchstone, and she galloped ahead of them. She returned rapidly, her form blurring as it moved.

'What's happening to her?' Ace asked.

'That is not Fleet,' Bat told her, *'but merely a projection of her spirit. Look.'*

Ace watched the image of the Ceffyl as it pranced before the herd. It rose up on its hind legs and then lunged forward, following this with three tosses of its head and a side-swipe its tail. When the dance was finished, the image began to streak and fragment until it was no longer visible. Once it was completely gone, the herd began to move again.

'By the way she moved, she gave us directions to her true self', ' Bat explained.

'But how did she do it? How did she project an image of herself?'

'She merely showed us one of her possible futures. In that future, she returned from the touchstone and performed the leading ritual, but in her actual future she remained by the touchstone.'

'To save energy!' said Ace.

'That's right. It used to be important in the location of food for the entire herd. But now we use it for conveying other messages.'

'Oh wow, that's evolution.'

'Is it?'

’Yes, I think so. You evolved the way to tell others where your food was and then changed when that was no longer necessary. The Professor told me that examples of actual evolution are quite rare – in Earth science anyway.’

‘ *"The Professor” is another name for your friend the Doctor?'* Bat asked.

‘Yes.' Ace struggled to recall what else the Doctor had told her about evolution. ‘He once said that the universe is big enough for all the conflicting theories of species development to have some validity.'

‘And what does that mean?’

'Who knows?' Ace shrugged.

Fleet was waiting for them atop a rocky mound. On their approach she lept down and cantered up to meet them. She whinnied playfully and mimicked the dance she had performed *in absentia*, then returned to her vantage point. Once the herd had gathered at the foot of the mound she rather theatrically lowered her head and touched her horn to something on the ground. She descended and let another of the Ceffyl take her place. The action was repeated by each of the herd.

'Ace, dismount please.’

Ace slipped off Bat’s back and let her go up and touch her horn on the ground. When Bat returned she said to Ace, *'Now you.’*

'What?'

'You are an honorary member of the herd. You must form part of the quorum.'

'Right.' Ace climbed up amongst the rocks. Close-up. the mound was revealed as being mainly rock with some soil in the crevices which provided a home for small shrubs. She reached the summit and looked around. Not certain what to do, she merely squatted down and pressed her palm against the cold rock.

'No, Ace,' Bat's voice sounded quietly in her mind.

Ace wondered what she was required to do. It was as though she was being put up in front of her class again, standing at the blackboard with no idea how to solve the quadratic equation. Just as she would have done in that situation, she gazed intently at the rock, as though the answer would appear out of nowhere. There was a seam of green stone running across the surface and as it was the only distinguishing mark she could see she touched that instead.

'Nearly, Ace.'

Ace ran her hand along the seam and then suddenly felt a buzz in her arm. It faded quickly, but seemed to be the effect that was expected. She descended from the mound and joined the herd. One by one the Ceffyl lay down in a large circle. Ace was the last to sit down. As she watched, a light extended from the top of the rock until she

could see the auras of every member of the herd - this was obviously one of the effects of the touchstone.

All of the auras were varying shades of white, except one. That one had a leprous quality to it, tingeing it a sad, off-yellow colour. This one Ceffyl now rose and approached the touchstone for a second tune. The source of the light bleached her aura back to white and then, to Ace's initial horror, the Ceffyl regurgitated, The pain that she was going through was obvious, but eventually something emerged from her mouth. It was broken remnant of a horn.

'What's going on?' Ace asked.

'It is the horn of our little sister. She died at the hands of a demon some days since. Whistle was charged to carry her horn to a place of rest. Now her duty is almost finished. Watch!'

As Whistle clenched the horn between her teeth, the light from the touchstone dissembled it, absorbing its molecules into the rock itself. Whistle shivered and quaked until the process was over.

Finally, she retreated and her aura was blinding white. She returned to the circle and a discussion began.

Ace could hear only the part of the debate which Bat contributed, but the final decision was quickly relayed to her.

'We have decided to accept your plan, Ace. As you are human you are better able to understand other humans and so we believe what you say is true.'

'Good!'

'But we must first hear the way in which you hope to get us inside Dinorben.'

Ace took the rucksack off her back. She opened it and withdrew her deodorant cans, laying them out in front of her. There were seven in all.

'Um, do you still need this touchstone?' she asked with innocence in her voice.

'It has served its purpose in the quorum, yes.'

'What did it do?'

'It ensures that we reveal our true feelings, by making our auras clear to all.'

'Right then, so you don't need it any more?'

'No.'

'In that case. I suggest that you retire to, say, that tree over there, while I demonstrate something to you.'

Puzzled, Bat instructed the rest of the Ceffyl to follow her to where Ace had indicated. Ace waited until they were all safe and then pulled the cap off one of her cans. She inserted it into a crack in the rock and then ran as fast as she could towards the herd. She counted under her breath and flung herself to the ground when she reached twenty.

The explosion transformed the rock into flying fragments which rained to the ground all around.

'Ace, are you all right?' Bat asked, her voice tinged with concern, Ace pushed herself to her feet. 'Yes, I'm fine. What do you think?' She gestured towards what remained of the rock and a broad grin spread across her face.

'I don't understand.'

'Well, do you think I can get us through the walls of Dinorben with this stuff?'

'You intend to breach the wall?'

'No!' Ace shook her head.

'No?'

'No, I'm going to blow it to bits.'

They left at once, churning the thin layer of snow up into a muddy mess with their hooves. The journey would not them long, but they had a slight detour to make.

'We hear Herne calling out. He is in pain. You have met Herne?'

'Yes, but he was weird. He apologized to the Professor for something that he hadn't done. I didn't understand.'

'Herne is strange. He does not perceive events in the same way that we do. This would explain his knowledge of what is to come.'

'But why did he apologize? Why doesn't he just not do what ... ? I've just realized - when the Sidhe camp was attacked. That was Herne. It didn't connect but I saw the light, the same light that surrounds Herne. Was that what he was apologizing for?'

'I do not know, Ace.'

They could see where Herne lay from a great distance away, for he was burning with a light as bright as distant suns. He lay in a circle of brown soil at the centre of a deserted village. The common land was the focal point of village life but now it was untouched by snow or plants and bore no evidence that midsummer celebrations had once been held there. One of the houses, half within Herne's aura of light, had collapsed into shattered ruins and the stones were turning slowly to dust. The herd stopped and tried to call out to Herne.

'Herne! Herne! Answer us!'

Herne did not stir from his prone position, and though he mouthed words none came. The only reply was a loud roaring just as on the night of the attack. Once more, Ace thought she could almost distinguish words amongst the sound, but if they were really words then they were in another language.

Finally, the waiting became too long for Fleet. She dashed forward to rouse Herne.

The effect was instant and horrible With each move forward, Fleet grew smaller. Her limbs became more gangling and her head grew

larger in proportion to her body Carried forward by her own momentum she could not stop the changes The legs became less distinct and shrunk up into her body; the head took up more and more of her for. All the time she grew smaller until the onlookers could no longer see her.

'What's happened to her' Ace asked, disgusted.

'Herne is ill … in his mind. I have looked forward and can see only possible futures without him. He must be dying. We should leave him. There is nothing we can do.'

They approached Dinorben cautiously. Ace had no intention of causing widespread slaughter by letting all of the sieging armies into the humans' refuge at once To this end they came to Dinorben from its western side where the hills surrounding the valley provided most of the protection but were surmounted by sturdy walls that were not as strong as the huge walls that crossed the mouth of the valley and provided housing for the upper echelons of the human society, but they were enough to keep out attackers not armed as Ace was.

Although it meant a long uphill walk Ace approached the wall alone – she didn't want the *:* Ceffyl to be filled with arrows by overzealous soldiers. It was something of a slog, but Ace was fit and healthy and so she wasn't breathing heavily when she reached the wall.

She looked up at the wall expectantly. As she had been nearing the top, she had seen torches moving along the wall and she felt sure that she had been observed. A torch came into view and illuminated a head that peered down at her.

'Hello ' she shouted, waving up cheerfully.

'You down there, what are you doing outside?'

'Oh, nothing much. Hanging out, you know as you do.'

'If you seek entry to Dinorben you must go to the town of Pontarcwai and wait for Chulainn of the Clyr and his people. We will not permit entry to any less It is too dangerous.'

'No, it's all right. I'll stick around.' She waited for a reply. The soldier continued to stare down at her, so she sat down with her back against the wall and looked towards the distant horizon. She pulled a comb from her rucksack and began tugging it through her tangled hair. The torch light falling on her from above disappeared, but Ace remained where she was. She could hear a muttered conversation.

'You still up there?' she shouted. The muttering stop and the light came back, only to vanish again.

Ace decided that it was time to make her move. She kicked away some of the earth from the base of the wall – she had to go quite deep but she eventually came to some cracks into which she inserted one of her cans of nitro-nine. She repeated the procedure at short intervals

along the wall.

Nitro-nine was Ace's pride and joy. It's all very well when you first discover that the secret of loud bangs is the expansion of gases within confined spaces, it's great when you manage your first truly destructive chemical reaction, but the satisfying moment comes when you create an explosive that does serious damage whilst looking and sounding aesthetically pleasing. Nitro-nine would have appealed to da Vinci and been appreciated by Beethoven.

Now came the tricky bit. For maximum effect, Ace wanted the cans to explode simultaneously. She'd fiddled with the fuses and hoped that they would be right, but that had never been her strong point. With fingers crossed, she nerved herself and pulled the lid off the first can. Immediately she raced to unleash the rest of the cans. With scant time to spare she headed down the hill.

There wasn't perfect synchronicity, but it did the job. The first blast knocked Ace off her feet, and the three others took out most of the wall. Within seconds of the echoes dying away, Ace heard hoofbeats pounding up the hill. Bat was at the head of the herd and Ace wasted no time in leaping on her back.

What was left of the wall presented no obstacle to the nimble feet of the Ceffyl. They were over it and into the valley in no time. Ace gave a wild victory whoop and pointed Bat tow the circle that led home.

11:

Corn Circles

Arthur looked with distaste at the two eggs gazing up at him from the sputtering oil. His head was still reeling from the whisky he had downed the night before. He had received word as to how much he could expect to be paid for the pub - it was nowhere near enough, considering what he had put into the pub. At the same time, to his' frustration the pub was not a going concern and he really had little alternative but to sell.

He tilted the frying pan to stop the eggs sticking and then transferred them to the warm plate underneath the grill. A health-conscious person would be balked at the sight of the plate - fried bread, tomatoes, sausages, bacon, mushrooms, baked beans and now eggs. Arthur picked up a tea towel and wrapped his hand in it so that he could carry the meal out.

The rather large gentleman was seated by the fireside when the took the breakfast in. Arthur placed the plate before him.

‘Ah, thank you.’

‘Would you like some tea, sir.’

‘Do you have coffee?’

‘Yes, sir.'

‘Black, please. And a morning paper if you have one.'

‘Very good, sir.'

The gentleman stopped him leaving, resting a hand on his arm.

'Tell me, why do you have the fire burning, even when it’s summer?'

‘Gives the place a cheerful atmosphere,' Arthur told him morosely

‘Ah, yes, that would explain it.’

The two American boys came into the room, They gave Arthur a cheerful greeting and sat down with the large gentleman.

‘Hmmm, That looks good,’ David said 'We'll have that twice, if that’s all right?’

'Of course, sir.'

'And coffee. '

'Tea for me. '

'Jack, you're turning into an Englishman!'

'Can't drink Diet Pepsi all the time.'

Arthur stomped out of the room, wondering as he went whether he was quite as suited to the catering trade as he had always thought.

Stevens waited until the pub's owner had left and then leant across the table to speak to Jack and David.

'I got in touch with my office first thing this morning. The chap

who owned the coach that crashed has just bought another. I was told that he'd bought the first coach to help his brother set up in business, but this can't be the same reason, because his brother died in the accident. Then again, it was Constable Hughes who told me that. '

David laughed. 'Yeah, well we know how much we can rely on his word, don't we? But there's something I wanted to tell you - I've remembered something that one of my kidnappers said while I was locked up in the cupboard.'

Stevens paused midway through putting a fork through his bacon. 'Oh yes?'

'Yeah. Jack, you know those stones we were looking for?'

'Of course I do.'

'Well, I think we got hold of the wrong end of the stick. I heard him talking about the stones, but he didn't mean just any old stones, he was talking about a stone circle.'

'What, you mean like Stonehenge?'

'Exactly like Stonehenge.'

'But you said that the centaur had come from between stones,' Stevens said.

'Hey, I was just saying what I heard. Maybe these centaurs live underground and they have a tunnel that comes up in the middle of a stone circle.'

'Doesn't sound very likely.'

'Well, it's a start, isn't it?'

'I suppose so.'

Stevens reached into his pocket. 'Here, I've got a map of the area. Stone circles are usually marked.'

David and Jack moved to the next table and spread the map out on it. Jack spotted the circle first.

'There it is! Look, it's in that valley that we couldn't get into. You know, the one with the big gate and the warning signs.'

'Right!'

'Let me look.' Stevens leaned across. 'Well, who'd have thought it? That's where I've got to go this morning. Look, this farmhouse is called Dinorben. That's where Emrys Hughes lives.'

'Emrys Hughes?'

'The man who owns the coach. You can come with me and we'll see what he has to say about all this.'

'Damn and blast! We could be waiting here all day!' Stevens exclaimed, slamming his fist down on the bonnet of his car. After arriving at the gates, they had waited hopefully for someone to turn up and let them in. They had been there now for twenty minutes and Stevens was becoming impatient.

'Take it easy,' David said. 'Why don't we just reverse a few metres and hit the gates at speed. That'll get us through.'

'Thank you for that oh-so helpful suggestion, but I am meant to be a police officer.' He reached inside his car and pulled open the glove compartment, taking out a portable phone. 'Hate the bloody things.

Danger to driving, but I suppose they do have their uses.' He tapped out a number. 'Yes, hello, is that Gwydyr police station? This is Inspector Stevens. I called in yesterday, you remember? Good. Can you find out the phone number of a Mr Emrys Hughes for me please. Thanks very much .... Bloody nuisance, the whole business.:: Yes, sorry, he lives in a place called Dinorben, Llanfer Ceiriog. Quick, Jack, I've got a pen and pad in my car. Jot down this number, will you?' He reeled off a telephone number. 'Thanks very much. Bye.'

Jack handed the pad over and Stevens dialled the number. He stood tapping his foot on the ground until the phone was answered,

'Hello is that Mr Emrys Hughes? It is! Good. I'm Inspector Stevens of Scotland Yard. I'd like a word with you if that's all right? No, not over the phone, I'm actually waiting at your gate. You'll come and let us in? Too kind, sir, too kind.' Stevens threw the phone on to the back seat of his car. 'About bloody time too,' he swore, staring down the amused look David was giving him.

Five minutes later, a tall figure wearing an undersize Barbour jacket and shabby brown trousers ambled up to the gate.

'You Inspector Stevens?' he asked suspiciously.

'That's right.' Stevens showed his identity card to the man.

'Well, you'd better come up to the house then.' He dug in his pockets for a bunch of keys and then reached through the gate to unfasten the chain and padlock. He swung open the metal gates and let Stevens drive through, then closed and locked the gates behind the car. He wandered over to the driver's window and leaned against the side of the car.

'You follow the gravel road up and round, see, and I'll meet you up at the house.'

'You wouldn't like to hop in the back, would you?' Stevens offered.

Emrys laughed harshly. 'No, I'll meet you up there.' He pushed himself off the car and walked slowly round in front of it. 'I'll be waiting.'

'He must have run,' David said, looking at the man standing calmly outside the front door of the house.

'He doesn't look out of breath,' Jack commented.

'Yeah, but he must have run,' David protested. 'There's no other way he could have got here ahead of us. '

'Stop trying to work out how he got here. Let's just talk to him,

Stevens suggested, getting out of the car. 'Mr Hughes, thank you for seeing me.'

'Well, you're police, isn't it? Who are these two?'

'Mr Gibson and Mr Pilgrim,' Stevens replied in an attempt to give some sense of official involvement.

'Ah, well, you'd better come inside. I'll brew up some tea.'

He took them inside and sat them down at a flimsy kitchen table that swayed ominously when Jack rested his elbows on it. The kitchen was untidy with no sign of order in the way it was arranged.

'So what can I do for you?' Emrys asked.

'I would have come to see you sooner, but I was told you were away. It's about the coach accident a few days ago.'

'Oh, yes?'

'The coach is registered as belonging to you.'

Hughes acknowledged this with a nod.

'So do you know anything about what it was being used for on that night?'

'No. Should I?'

'I had hoped so,' Stevens admitted. 'We need to clear some details up.'

'Well, Selwyn would know ... but, obviously, he's in no fit state to tell.' He didn't seem particularly upset at his brother's death, but these things affected different people in different ways.

'So you wouldn't know anything about the large amount of money that was found in it?' Stevens pressed him.

'No.'

'And you wouldn't be able to identify any of the passengers?'

'I very much doubt it.'

'You're sure?'

'Sure. Is that all?'

Stevens considered this, but thought of something else. 'So why have you bought a new coach?'

'Got to keep my brother's business going, haven't I? There's his family to think of.'

'I didn't know he had family.'

'No. Is that all?'

'Well there's also the matter of a stone circle on your land. Would you mind if we took a look at it?'

'Yes,' Emrys answered bluntly.

Jack leapt up. 'What do you know about centaurs? Where are you hiding them?'

'I don't know what you're talking about. And I don't think you're a police officer. I think I should ask you to leave.'

'Why won't you let us see the circle?' David asked.

'It's private property, isn't it? Why should I?'

'This is where he came from, isn't it?' Jack shouted. ‘This is where the centaur came from?'

'Centaurs?' Hughes sneered. 'They don't exist, boy, they're legend.'

'I think we might as well leave, lads,' Stevens told them. ‘I don't think Mr Hughes has any reason for letting us see his circle. If you'd come down and let us out of the gates, Mr Hughes?'

'Aye, sorry you had a wasted visit. I think your American friends would do better to look in Greece for centaurs.'

Back in the car, Jack said to Stevens, 'He's laughing at us, he knows all about it.'

'There's nothing we can do at the moment. He has every right not to let us wander round his land.

Maybe if we came back some other time when he's not around.'

'I'm beginning to think we may as well leave Llanfer Ceiriog and get back home,' Jack said.

'You could be right,' David agreed, 'we're getting nothing done here.'

Even Stevens was prepared to admit defeat. 'I can't around much longer either. I've got to get back to my office. And besides, my colleagues are using the coach accident to account for some missing persons. It tidies up some case them.' He drew the car to a halt by the gates. This time, they arrived some minutes ahead of Hughes, as if he was deliberately delaying them. Stevens looked at him sourly, hoping for a parting shot.

'You know those signs on your gate are illegal. You can’t shoot people. . . And I hope you have a licence for that shotgun.’

Jack cocked his head to one side. He whispered to David, 'Do you hear that?'

'Don't you worry about me,' Emrys assured Stevens. ‘I’ll only shoot centaurs with it.'

David's eyes widened. 'It's hoofbeats, and lots of them.’

Jack pushed open his car door at the same time as Emrys pulled up his shotgun and loosed off both barrels into the trees. And then, between the trees, a girl on a horse appeared.

'Yeee-ha!' she shouted, and a herd of horses exploded from the woods in a flurry of legs, streaming manes and swirling tails. Every one of them was a magnificent animal, powerful and obviously bursting with vitality.

Stevens pushed himself slowly out of the car, his eyes growing wide as the horses drew closer. A smile crossed his face as he reached out a hand to pull Emrys's gun away from him.

‘What was that you said about centaurs? He grinned triumphantly

at the look on Emrys's face. 'I don't think you mentioned unicorns.'

12:

Fire and Water

Daffyr couldn't get his huge bulk in through the front door of the farmhouse as it had never been intended that a horse should be brought inside. Instead he came in via the grain store. He opened his arms wide to greet the Doctor and Bathsheba.

'So you are from Earth, like my good friend Stuart?' he boomed.

'Well, actually I'm from a place called Gallifrey, ' the Doctor admitted, 'but Earth is a regular stopover point, And Bathsheba is from Tír na n-Óg.'

Daffyr ignored the petty details. 'And you will stay with us for a while?'

'I am in something of a hurry,' the Doctor told him.

'Then you will at least dine with us.'

'Of course,' the Doctor smiled, 'nothing would give us greater pleasure, but as you're offering, I'll have to put off nothing.'

Stuart interrupted the exchange of pleasantries and invitations. 'Doctor, if you're planning to use my car to get to Goibhnie then I'd like to come with you.'

'Well, that's your prerogative,' the Doctor shrugged. He ruffled his hair with one hand, feeling somewhat exposed without his hat. 'It is your car after all. But I should warn you that it could be very dangerous. I want to drive there so that I can make a quick retreat, you see.'

'What is all this talk of leaving?' Daffyr shouted angrily. Hadn't the little man heard him? He raised his dark tail belligerently and clenched his fists. 'I have invited you to feast with me, and feast we shall!'

'You don't understand. I think it may be vitally important that I reach Goibhnie soon. Vital for your future. '

'What do you know of the future?' Daffyr asked. 'If you can see anything of the future then you will know that the meal which I am to give you is the best you will ever have experienced.'

'Yes, yes, all right, we'll stay for your feast, agreed the Doctor.

'Daffyr;' Stuart asked, 'what is so special about this feast of yours?'

'Special? What is so special?' Daffyr roared. 'I shall tell you, shall I, my little human friend?

'Yes I'd appreciate that.'

'There was a glint in Daffyr's eye as he quietly said, Why, we feast on the rarest of meats. We shall be dining on dragon!'

Correct imbalance in #76/2.

Scan multiple signal source at 7:2:15:380.

Awaiting instructions.
Correct imbalance in #76/2.
Correct imbalance in #76/2.
Relocate multiple signal source.
Awaiting instructions.
Scan multiple signal source at 4:26:3:370.
Correct imbalance in #76/2.
Imminent loss of functioning in #79/2, #73/2, #74/2.
A waiting instructions.
There was a call from outside the farmhouse.
'My lord!' Daffyr went to the doorway and looked out.
'What is it, Allan?'

'My lord, the dragon has circled the camp a third time. The huntsmen believe they will be able to take it on its next pass.'

Stuart came over to the door. 'Daffyr, when you talk about a dragon, are we talking about a huge, fire-breathing lizard type thing?'

'That's right! You have them on Earth?'

'No,' the Doctor said, 'not as such. I did encounter one on the planet Svartos. Admittedly, the fire was laser beams and it wasn't so much a lizard, more a bio-mechanoid. But the locals called it a dragon.'

'Don't let them touch the beast until I'm out there, Daffyr shouted. 'Would you care to join me in watching the sport, my friends?'

'Hardly sport,' the Doctor murmured. 'Yes I'll come.'

'Yes,' Stuart agreed. 'Bathsheba?'

'I'd rather not.' Bathsheba was slightly afraid at the thought of a dragon so close to the camp. She'd heard stories of the animals and had even seen the effect they could have on crops.

'You just wait here, Bats,' the Doctor told her smiling. 'We won't be long.'

Stuart squinted up into the sky, scanning the air for the dragon. It crossed his mind to wonder if it would be red like the traditional Welsh dragon, but when it finally came into view such trivial thoughts were wiped from his mind.

It was as though an elephant had taken to the air such was its mass, as if it had sprouted wings and flown. Detail was hard to make out, for it was just a silhouette against the dark sky, but the creature had wings and a thin, tapering head at the end of a long neck that swung from side to side surveying what lay below it; around the neck was a bony ruff, splayed outwards to accentuate the size of the head. Its wings were thin and membraneous - Stuart could see some red light filtering through - and they rippled slowly as the moving air passed over them. The dragon flew with a list to one side that seemed

to be dragging it gradually down towards the ground.

As it flew overhead, a phalanx of archers unleashed their arrows at it. The speeding missiles tore holes in the wings, but otherwise seemed to have little effect. A second hail of arrows was sent into the air, bouncing uselessly off the tough skin of the dragon.

'Bah! You're worse than useless, the lot of you,' shouted Daffyr. 'Allan, fetch me my crossbow. I'll show you how to bring down the beast.' Allan hurried away and while he was gone Daffyr berated his archers. 'You can't just point your bows up into the air and hope for the best, you damned fools. Dagda take you, you have to aim for its vulnerable spot, don't you know that? Not a one of you came close.

And where is this weak spot? Watch and I'll show you.' Allan returned and handed over the weapon.

'Now then, watch carefully.' He slipped the bolt into its groove and then cranked up the bow. Hefting the weapon, he rested it against his shoulder and stood, steady as a rock, waiting for the dragon to pass over again.

As its shadow covered his face, he fired the bolt. It flew straight as a die and thudded into the dragon, but the creature flew on, seemingly unscathed.

'Damn and blast the animal, it isn't playing fair!' Daffyr flung the crossbow on to the ground and brought a hoof down on it.

But even as they watched, the dragon faltered in its flight, its wings crumpled and it plunged down to earth. Daffyr's enthusiasm returned immediately. He laughed triumphantly and snatched a sword from one of his attendants. 'What did I tell you?' he cried. 'Hit it through the head and it's yours.'

‘Aim for the eyepiece?' the Doctor suggested.

'Quite right!' Daffyr guffawed. 'You hear that? The eye is the gap in a dragon's armour - even this human knows that. Come, let us finish it off!'

Daffyr set off at a quick trot, forgetting the effect that this would have on his injured hooves, and followed closely by Stuart and the Doctor and a number of excited Firbolg.

The dragon had fallen to the ground just within the camp, crushing two tents. It struggled to its feet as Daffyr approached. Its small piglike head turned to watch him with an eye which oozed aqueous humour where the crossbow bolt projected; a slender tongue darted out between its narrow lips to sample the air.

'Be careful, Daffyr,' Stuart cautioned the aggressive warrior.

As it turned its whole body to face this threat, the dragon stamped its four feet, raking at the canvas on which it stood and drew in a long whining breath. Daffyr trotted in close brandishing his sword above

his head.

‘Care! Ha! Who needs care?' he cried. He swung the sword in a wide arc against the dragon's flank, cutting a gash in the thick skin. As he pulled the sword away he brought it up through one of the delicate wings, devastating the membraneous network of skin. The creature growled a warning and blew out a. fine spray of noxious liquid at the crowd of onlookers. Catching a glimpse of a spark at the back of the dragon's mouth, the Doctor flung himself to the ground as a ball of flame exploded into the air. He raised his head, sniffed and detected the faint odour of semicombusted hydrocarbons. There was nothing magical about this dragon's fire.

'Still got some fight in you?' Daffyr roared at the monster. He swung the sword again, this time at the dragon's groggily swaying neck. The creature's tail flicked round, searching for a target and caught Daffyr on the flank. He fell with a shout of pain, but as the dragon lunged at him he pushed his sword up and through its neck. It roared and shook, attempting to get free, but only succeeded in doing itself more damage. One of its clawed feet lashed out at Daffyr leaving a bloody wound on his thigh but he struck again and again at the dragon's neck until the head fell away. A shiver ran along the dragon's huge body and then the flaccid leg muscles collapsed under its weight and it slumped to the ground.

Breathing heavily, Daffyr threw his sword to one side and struggled to his feet. He picked up the dragon's head and with its hot, stinking fluids dripping over his hide, raised it over his head and displayed it to his assembled clansmen. A cheer broke out amongst them and then grew louder when he proclaimed that a feast would be held that night.

The Doctor approached Daffyr cautiously, making sure he was not in the way when the dragon's head was dropped to the ground. 'Do these creatures cause much trouble?' he asked.

‘Aye, they are a menace, a pest. They burn crops and houses. It is rare for one to be killed. But I did it!'

'It looked rather weak to me,' Stuart said. Even as he made the comment, and despite its truth, he realized it was not the right thing to say. Daffyr bristled.

'It was a fine specimen, and only a Daffyr could slay it. I shall use its head as part of the emblem of the herd. It will lead us into battle and we shall win.'

'Battle?'

'Well, we shall feast before that.' A broad grin broke the Firbolg leader's face as he examined the slain monster. 'By the gods, a single leg will feed us all!'

For the feast, trestle tables were erected around a huge bonfire on

the outskirts of the camp. The Firbolg didn't need seats, they merely settled down on the ground with their legs fold underneath them.

Stuart brought chairs from the farmhouse. It was a strange affair, the feasters illuminated from one side by the rays of the sickly star and from the other side by the dancing flames over which the dragon's leg was roasted on a spit. The first four courses were rather unappetizing to the humans, having an overreliance on the culinary delight of dried grass, but as the feast progressed there was a gradual shift over to meat. At last the dragon meat was ready and a large chunk was cut off and placed before Daffyr.

He tore off a thin strip and flung it into the flames with the words, 'For the Land Mother!'

He picked up the slab of meat and bit into it lustily, tearing off a large piece that he began to chew with gusto. The enthusiasm rapidly dimmed and it took many seconds of chewing before, with a mighty gulp, he swallowed it down. His face twisted but he raised his cup and shouted, 'Excellent!' before swilling the meat down with his mead.

'I think it might be a good idea to avoid the dragon meat, the Doctor whispered to Bathsheba.

'I don't think he liked it much,' she agreed.

'The dragon interests me though,' the Doctor said, rubbing his chin. 'I'd like to have a closer look at it sometime.' He leaned to one side where the Firbolg Ferllu was sitting. Tell me, Ferllu, why do you have a Troifran numeral on your flank?'

'A what, Doctor?'

'The mark on your flank, what is it'

'The humans call it a witch mark. It is something all of the peoples of Tír na n-Óg have in common.'

'Except the humans?'

'Yes.'

The Doctor nodded and turned his attention to the food in front of him. 'Bathsheba, you haven't eaten much.'

'I do not like the fare,' she whispered.

'Well, pass it over to me.' He took her plate and turned to Ferllu. 'Ferllu, some more food for you.'

'Oh Doctor, I cannot take any more from you.'

'Don't worry, we're all quite sated here.

'Well in that case ... ' Ferllu accepted the plate and attacked the food greedily.

'I think some work on the appetite centres might be required,' the Doctor murmured to himself.

'What was that, Doctor?' Stuart asked.

'Nothing, just a footnote to myself. I think as soon as this is over

we should set off to Goibhnie.'

'Right you are.'

'And you, Bathsheba, will stay here with Daffyr.'

'What?' Her eyes suddenly brimmed with tears. 'You can't leave me - not when I am so close to Goibhnie. I won't let you.'

'My dear, we can't take you with us. It will be terribly dangerous,' Stuart advised her.

'But I've come all this way, and Goibhnie will be able to mend my arm. Gabby told me about how he healed a sheep once. I must come with you.'

'Bathsheba,' the Doctor spoke quietly, 'if you are sure that you want to come with us then I won't stand in your way. But Stuart is right, we are risking our lives. According to the Tuatha, it was Goibhnie who unleashed the demons on Tír na n-Óg. He may not be the benevolent person you believe him to be.'

But Bathsheba did believe in Goibhnie. For all of her life, short though it was, the tales she had heard of Goibhnie told only of how good he was. Nothing would shake her belief in the god who could untwist and restore the useless muscles in her arm and expel any badness in her.

'I will come.'

'Very well.'

'Doctor, I'm not sure ... ' began Stuart, but he was interrupted by Daffyr.

'And now,' he roared, 'a drink to our guests from Earth.' He threw back his head and started to pour a jug of mead down his throat. The assembled Firbolg cheered him on as the flow of mead turned from a flood to a trickle. Suddenly, most of it was blown into the air as Daffyr came up spluttering. He laughed uproariously and then threw the jug into the fire.

Making quiet farewells to Ferllu, the Doctor, Stuart and Bathsheba left the singing and dancing that the feast had developed into, and made their way to the farmhouse. The dragon's head lay on the kitchen table, glaring mawkishly at the blank wall. Bathsheba looked away from it in disgust - liquid was seeping from the severed stump of its neck.

'Ah, just what I wanted to see,' the Doctor said. 'I have my doubts about this dragon.' He gave a cursory glance to its eyes and teeth, but then turned his attention to the exposed deep tissues of the neck.

'Stuart, what do you think of this?' He pointed to the surface of the vertebra.

'Well, it's not quite the usual shape for a cervical vertebral bone. '

'Something much more fundamental than that.'

Stuart looked closer. 'It seems ridiculous to say it, but it looks as though it's made of metal.' He peered even closer and then scraped away some of the tissue. 'And the intervertebral disc appears to be composed of some sort of plasticized fibre.'

'You're quite right,' the Doctor assured him, pleased, for once, that a human was able to use his observational skills.

'But that's impossible!'

The Doctor sighed, revising his opinion. Despite empirical evidence, the human could not accept something beyond his experience. He pushed Stuart aside and knelt at the end of the table so that he could look up at the severed neck.

'Wouldn't you also say that it's impossible for a creature of such mass to fly on wings like this one had, and that it's at least moderately unlikely that it would breathe fire?'

'I suppose so,' Stuart admitted.

'What are you doing, Doctor?' Bathsheba asked. He had eased his hand into the tight confines of the vertebral canal and was feeling around for something.

'Just trying to work something loose.' He struggled momentarily and then brought his hand out clutching a small metallic ball from which dangled a tube of fibrous tissue.

'The dragon's brain?' asked Stuart.

'Yes.'

'But that means that it's just a machine.'

'The human brain is just a complex machine, Stuart. This is a bio-mechanoid. Living tissue welded on to a metallic framework and controlled by a positronic brain.' He pushed the brain back inside the head.

'Still, it's not much use to anyone now.' He stood up to his full height. 'Time to leave.'

They gathered up some of their possessions and went to Stuart's car. For protection, it had been covered with some of the material that the Firbolg used for their tents. They pulled away the covering to reveal the large, blocky car underneath. Bathsheba marvelled at it but couldn't understand how it could possibly be any use.

‘Get inside and I'll show you,' Stuart smiled.

‘Get inside?' she asked.

The Doctor pulled open the door for her with a flourish. 'Don't worry, Bats, in you get.' He pushed the door shut behind her and saw a slight panicked look appear on her face. He quickly slipped into the passenger seat and Stuart settled down in the driver's position.

Stuart had to turn the engine over several times before it would start, but it did eventually and he manoeuvred the car out the camp. Once clear of the obstructions he picked up speed and called back to

Bathsheba, 'There! Not so bad is it?'

There was no reply.

The Doctor turned to look at her. 'She's fainted, poor thing.'

'Better open the window,' Stuart suggested, 'she probably feels confused by the lack of movement sensations. Takes dogs a while to get used to car travel as well.'

'Caused by discrepancy between sensory informational inputs.'

'That's right. Also known as car sickness.' He glanced into his rear-view mirror. 'Ah, I see she's returning to us.'

'Bathsheba, are you all right?'

'Yes, I... no, I don't feel too well.'

'You'll get used to it,' Stuart reassured her.

'I'm not sure I want to get used to it.'

'Doctor, what you said back there ... ?'

'Yes?'

'You seemed to imply that you'd travelled to other planets?'

'That's right, I'm a Gallifreyan, a Time Lord to be precise.'

'A Time Lord?' Stuart said sceptically.

'Yes. I have a craft which can transcend the boundaries of space and time - or at least it used to be able to. I'm afraid it's on its last legs at the moment. We've had rather a rough time of late. All part of the process of life.'

'Ah, time travel!' Stuart raised an eyebrow. 'But there was a time when I didn't believe in centaurs and trolls.'

'Trolls?' Realization dawned on the Doctor. 'Ah, you mean the Fomoir? I never thought of them like that.'

'It was the first thing that came into my mind when the Tuatha told me about them.' The car suddenly lurched to one side as it hit a lump in the ground. 'Whoops, better concentrate on where I'm going.'

'If anything's going to stop us getting to Goibhnie then we can at least hope that it won't be a car crash.'

And it wasn't a car crash that stopped them getting there, but a natural obstacle. At first it was just a glow in the distance, but as they drew closer they saw the sea spreading out across the horizon, letting off a dim phosphorescence. Goibhnie's island was visible, but the strip of water separating it from the mainland might as well have been a million miles wide - they couldn't cross it.

They stopped at the top of a hill that looked out across the waters and got out and examined the view.

Goibhnie's island was lit up by numerous lights that shone inwards from its boundaries. A low building rose from the rock in the centre of the island and at each end stood two towers surmounted by sky-scraping pylons.

'So what do we do, Doctor, stand here and shout to him?'

'There must be some way we can get out there. Bathsheba, do you remember any stories about how people used to contact Goibhnie?'

'He always used to come to us. I'm not sure if it was ever the other way around. Of course, there are the old legends of heroes who sailed out to his island to meet him.'

'Well we can hardly build a boat.'

'Maybe I could persuade Daffyr to get the Firbolg to make a raft for us?' suggested Stuart.

'Maybe. Hmmm, those two towers. I wonder ... ' the Doctor mused. He gazed down at the waves lapping gently against the shore. 'Oh dear,' he said. 'Look!'

The water had begun to bubble and froth with activity down below and suddenly, with a great whooshing and a fountain of steam, a form rose from the sea. Even at this distance, they could feel its eyes upon them. It clambered on to the beach on all fours and then stood up on two legs and howled. Its head was small in comparison with the rest of its body, but its teeth were large in comparison with its head.

'A demon!' Bathsheba cried, cowering back.

'I think we should get into the car,' the Doctor said.

Stuart agreed and slipped back behind the wheel. 'Discretion would definitely be the better part of valour.' He started the engine and put the car into a tight turn away from the monster. As he did so, the headlights flashed on another creature coming towards them from inland.

'They must have scented us,' the Doctor said.

'Me,' said Bathsheba, 'they scented me.'

Another form dashed out of the dark and flung itself on to the bonnet of the car. Stuart gave the wheel a sharp twist and flung the creature off.

'I hope there aren't too many of them.' He slammed his foot down on the accelerator pedal. 'And that they can't outrun us.'

There was a screeching as nails dragged down the rear windscreen, but the demon was left behind.

'Back to the camp?'

'Yes, I suppose so. Did you notice those masts on the island? '

'On top of the towers, yes. What about them?'

'I wondered if they were perhaps transmission masts, or receivers. Maybe we could contact Goibhnie through them. Treaty with him that way.'

'But we haven't got a transmitter,' Stuart pointed out.

'What about your car radio? Do you mind?' The Doctor reached forward and pulled the radio out from its fitting.

‘Do I have any choice? No, go ahead. I don't see what good it'll do you.'

'Oh, you know, a quick rejig and I'll have it broadcasting to the world,' the Doctor smiled.

'I wish I could understand what you're doing , Bathsheba said.

'I'll explain when I get the chance to tell you about electricity,’ the Doctor told her.

'Stuart, my friend,' Daffyr greeted him, 'I thought you'd run off without saying farewell.'

'Just an exploratory mission,' the Doctor said. He deposited his jacket on the bench and pulled his sweater over his head. Bathsheba sat down at the kitchen table and warmed her hands till the fire.

'And I thought to myself, Stuart wouldn't do that, now would he?’ Daffyr told the room.

‘All right, Daffyr, I get the point. You seemed to be enjoying yourself so much that I didn't want to disturb you.'

'Daffyr, you don't mind if I take a look at your dragon's head?' the Doctor asked. He squatted down at the end of the table.

'He's already ruined my car radio,' Stuart complained, 'he can't do anything worse to your head.'

Before Daffyr could veto his request, the Doctor reached in and took hold of the dragon's positronic brain. Daffyr looked surprised, 'What in Dagda's beard is that?' he said.

'The dragon's brain.'

'Not a delicacy?' Daffyr asked suspiciously .

'No more so than the flesh.'

Daffyr nodded his head. 'Not a delicacy. You may take it if that is all you want of the head.'

'Thank you.' The Doctor wandered out through the kitchen door, his nimble fingers already dismantling the delicate mechanism of the brain.

'This Doctor fellow seems to lack the graces necessary for mixing with the higher-ranking Firbolg,'

Daffyr told Bathsheba, looming over her. 'I like him!'

Stuart followed the Doctor out to his car. 'What are you up to, Doctor?'

'Just acting on a hunch which ... ' he extracted a small piece of electronics from the brain, 'seems to have been justified. There we are - a receiver-transmitter for electromagnetic disturbances of a similar wavelength to those your car radio uses. If I can combine the two and power them off your battery then I may be able to get something done.'

'Like what?'

'Well, I may be able to get in touch with Goibhnie. It occurred to

me that these dragons may be his eyes and ears throughout the land of Tír na n-Óg.'

'Not very subtle for bugs, are they? You couldn't exactly hide them in a phone.'

'Maybe he doesn't want to pick out subtle details, just broad trends. Follow the results of his misdeeds. Gloat. It's often the way.'

'You've had prior experience of megalomaniacs?' Stuart suggested.

'Mmmm, lots of them. Always follow the same pattern. Genius with deviant childhood, forced to eat liver, too much vitamin A, becomes ambitious, develops a taste for power. Before you know it they're trying to take over the universe and looking for someone to gloat at.'

The Doctor tweaked a wire out of the bowels of the radio and twisted it around a projection on the small component the brain. 'Of course, sometimes they just become traffic wardens. Genius traffic wardens with hypervitaminosis A, admittedly, and they do still get the chance to gloat but traffic wardens all the same.' He paused and looked up at Stuart. 'I don't want to run down your battery, so if you'd just start the engine running.'

Stuart did as he was told and then gazed closely at what the Doctor was doing. The Doctor seemed somewhat disconcerted by this and after chewing his lip, he looked up at Stuart and gave a smile.

'Perhaps you could go and put your ear against one of the speakers. If there is a return signal it may be quite faint.'

Stuart clambered on to the back seat of the car and watched the Doctor from there. Another wire was extracted from the radio which was then turned on. A low hiss emerged from loudspeakers.

'Nothing yet,' Stuart told the Doctor.

'I haven't actually started.'

'Oh, sorry.'

'Never mind.' The Doctor began to tap the wire against another part of the brain component in a complex rhythm:

'Will this Goibhnie be able to understand Morse code?'

'It isn't Morse code. Just listen to the speakers.' He repeated the tapping. 'Anything?'

'No, nothing.'

'We'll have to give him a chance to notice us, I suppose.' The Doctor went through the motions again ... and again ... and again.

'Nothing,' Stuart told him.

'Ah well, another brilliant piece of ad-lib microtechnology wasted.' The Doctor tossed his gadget into the foot-space of the passenger seat. He got out of the car and found Daffyr standing over him.

'Doctor, Bathsheba tells me you attempted to get to Goibhnie's island but were unable to do so.'

'That's right. And we've failed to make contact with him. We shall just have to go there and shine lanterns across the water or something. If it comes to the worst I could always swim to the island.'

Stuart protested. 'But there are those demons in the water.'

'Doctor, Doctor,' Daffyr laughed, 'there's no need to go to such extreme measures. There is a simple way to get to Goibhnie's island.'

'There is?'

'Of course. Wait for the sea to go out. Have you never heard of tides on Earth?'

'How could I be expected to know there was a submerged causeway out to the island?' the Doctor protested.

'If we'd stayed around till the end of the feast in the first place, Daffyr might have told us then.' Stuart gave a grunt as the car hit a stone and rocked unsteadily.

'Is this what you wanted?' Bathsheba asked. She held the metal stick up so that Stuart could see it in the mirror.

'Yes, that's the one. Now have a look and see if you can find a box labelled Tranquilon ... oh, I don't suppose you can read though.'

'Yes, I can!' Bathsheba told him. She turned and leaned over into the boot space of the car. It was littered with all sorts of boxes, bottles and tubes, many bearing unfamiliar names.

'I threw this into the car a few days ago,' Stuart told the Doctor 'because there'd been some reports of a feral dog around Llanfer Ceiriog. Always better to be safe than sorry.'

'It wasn't a dog, it was a wolf,' the Doctor told him, 'I encountered it just before Ace and myself entered Tír na n-Óg.'

'A wolf? From here?'

'Yes. It was one of the humans' tame animals. It was only attacking sheep because it was hungry, I should think. Hungry and frightened.'

'Here you are,' Bathsheba pushed a box under the Doctor's nose, 'Tranquilon.'

'We can use these against those demons if we come up against them. They may slow them down a little.'

'Only a little,' the Doctor agreed. He opened the box, took out one of the darts and loaded it into the rifle; as an afterthought he slipped several more of the darts into his jacket

'You don't think they'll attack again, do you?' Bathsheba asked anxiously.

'I don't see why they shouldn't,' Stuart told her.

'Don't worry, Bats, we're nearly at the island and we haven't seen ... '

'Jesus, what was that?' Stuart cried, twisting the wheel to the side.

'What?'

'Something just went through the headlights. Like a dog, only bigger, much bigger.'

'They're coming!'

'Stay calm,' the Doctor advised, 'just keep on driving. Daffyr told us that the causeway will be exposed now. Provided the demons don't catch us we should be able to outrun ... '

Suddenly a huge bulk flung itself against the side of the car, lifting it up and flipping it over.

Bathsheba screamed as the car tumbled over and over. There was a ripping sound as something penetrated the metal of the roof and the front windscreen suddenly filled with cobwebs. The car ground to a halt, right side up, but it had suffered too much damage. Once the engine had faltered to nothing, the silence was complete.

'It's gone,' said Stuart, clutching the rifle to himself. 'It can't have expected quite such an impressive result. We'll have to walk now.'

'Walk out there?' moaned Bathsheba.

The Doctor's sensitive ears were pricked now, listening. 'Be quiet, I think it's still out there ... '

The windscreen exploded inwards as the head of a horse, red eyes shining, nostrils flared and mouth agape, plunged through to attack them. Its force was such that it went between the Doctor and Stuart and into the gap between their seats. The Doctor flung his arms around its neck and shouted to the others,

'Quick, get out of the car.' He had barely registered Stuart opening his door when the creature began to thrash around to free itself. He let go and pushed himself out of his door.

'Doctor, help me!' Bathsheba screamed and the Doctor turned and saw that she was still inside. The creature was lunging forward to catch her in its teeth. He tugged her door open and `pulled her out, tossing her to the ground some feet from the car. The monster – if it was a horse then it was the worst kind of nightmare – pulled itself loose from the car's wreckage and turned to face them.

The Doctor pulled Bathsheba up by his side and cradled her against him. 'when I say, "Now", throw yourself under the car and I'll lead the demon away from you,' he whispered quickly. The monster took a step towards them and Bathsheba felt the Doctor's muscles tense.

'Now!' he shouted, but before either could move the ground in front of them exploded under the impact of a bolt of fire.

13:

The girl brought the unicorn to a stop just in front of the startled onlookers. The rest of the herd scattered to graze on the lush green vegetation.

'Are you lot friends of dog-breath?' she asked, nodding towards Hughes. He gazed at her with open dislike in his eyes.

'No, I'm a police officer. Inspector Stevens of Scotland Yard, Paranormal Investigations.'

'You're police! Brill!' She leapt off the back of the unicorn and put out a hand. She was wearing a black bomber jacket adorned with a variety of badges and luminous yellow leg warmers. Her hair tumbled around her shoulders in chestnut streams and when she smiled it was as though the sun had emerged from behind a cloud. Stevens shook her proffered hand, recognizing as he did how sweaty his own hand had become.

'D'you hear that, Bat?' Ace asked. 'This is a policeman. He's one of the officials who'll be able to help us.'

Jack pushed forward. 'Who are you? And where did all of these unicorns come from? Where have you been hiding them all?'

'And what about the centaurs?' David added, wanting to be noticed by this attractive girl.

'I'm Ace and this is Bat.'

'You can talk to it?' asked Stevens.

'She's a she, not an it,' Ace reprimanded him. 'Of course I can talk to her. She's a unicorn, dum-dum.'

'Where are you from?' Jack asked the unicorn, feeling slightly stupid,

'She can't talk to just anyone. She's from Tír na n-Óg.'

'Tír na n-Óg? David asked, wondering why the name sounded familiar.

'You said I could help you?' Stevens said.

'Yeah you see this guy ... Where's he gone?' They looked around - Hughes had discreetly left them.

'Anyway, Emrys Hughes and his people in Tír na n-Óg are trying to evacuate to Earth ... Wait a moment, did you say paranormal investigations?'

Stevens looked embarrassed, but nodded.

'Like *Ghostbusters?'* she grinned.

'Not exactly.'

'Oh. Anyway, they're trying to evacuate to Earth because their sun has vanished and demons are swarming over Tír na n-Óg. Do you

follow anything that I'm saying?'

'These unicorns are from another world,' Jack summed up. 'Is that right?'

'Yeah.' She nodded her head vigorously.

'And they're evacuating to Earth?'

'No not the Ceffyl, the humans. Look, maybe I'd better show you.' She paused as though she was listening to something. 'No, I'm sure it'll be all right. I'll just take them to the circle and show them Tír na n-Óg and we'll nip back before any of the guards can stop us.' The unicorn whinnied and headed off towards the rest of the herd.

'Come with me. I'll show you Tír na n-Óg.'

Ace led them along the track through the trees. As they neared the stone circle there was a rustling around them and suddenly they were surrounded by a ring of men dressed like something out of the Middle Ages - and carrying weapons that looked equally anachronistic. Emrys was with them.

'Oh no I knew I should have done something about you.'

'Take them through and hurry,' he ordered. 'You five men come with me and we'll deal with things here.'

'What's going on?' David asked.

'Well, we're still going to Tír na n-Óg, but it may be a longer stay than I'd planned,' Ace explained.

'Who are these people?'

'Stop asking dumb questions, Jack. They're the people from Tír na n-Óg and they aren't very friendly.'

'Keep moving, you!' one of the soldiers told him.

'Keep moving where? There's nowhere to go.'

'Into the circle,' Ace told him, 'that's the way to Tír na n-Óg.' She stepped forward into the centre of the stone circle and promptly vanished.

'Oh wow!' Jack exclaimed, following her, 'matter transm…'

'You next,' Stevens suggested to David.

'Okay, okay, I'm going.' David vanished.

Stevens turned to face his captors. 'It doesn't have any effect on fat, does it? Not an alternative to Weight Watchers?' His only reply was a shove that sent him backwards through gateway to the other world.

Ace found herself treading the same path she had gone along some days ago. Through the sadness and squalor of the tents of the humans they went. There was more of a chill in the air now and the people looked even more wretched. As they walked she tried to explain the situation to her three companions.

'Now you know where the unicorns - Ceffyl they're called here - came from. And this centaur that you found.'

'But what have the humans got against these mythological animals?' Inspector Stevens asked.

'Apparently there used to be another sun, like ours. One day it just disappeared. Round about the same time this guy called Goibhnie unleashed a plague of demons on Tír na n-Óg. The humans want to leave and settle on Earth.'

'That'd explain it,' Stevens nodded.

'Explain what?'

'The coach that Hughes bought. And the way people have been appearing in London, Birmingham and Cardiff.'

'I didn't know about that.'

'So why did you think Inspector Stevens could help you?' David asked.

'Well, I thought that if someone in authority could be told about what was going on, they could give the people of Tír na n-Óg some help fighting the demons. And then they wouldn't have to desert and leave everyone else to die.'

'Doesn't sound like a very likely scenario to me,' Stevens told her.

'It was the best plan I could think of. I wish the Doctor was here.'

'They're burning people,' Jack said.

Ace looked away. 'I know. Don't talk about it.'

Stevens took all the details of his surroundings in carefully. This was exactly the sort of situation he had never envisaged. He had considered being contacted by aliens, capturing the Loch Ness Monster and staking a vampire. He had never thought that he might discover an entire world where unicorns and centaurs were a reality, but here it was. It had none of the glamour of legend, not in real life - it couldn't be expected to have fairy mounds, magic swords, fire-breathing dragons. Some things just weren't feasible.

They approached a huge building that spanned the width of the valley. A flight of stone steps led up to a doorway. At the foot of the steps stood another soldier, waiting for them.

'Hello, Captain Rhys,' Ace greeted him: She turned to her companions. 'Inspector Stevens, Jack, David - this is Captain Rhys.'

'Hello, Ace. I thought I told you that you couldn't come back to Dinorben.'

Ace smiled sweetly. 'I don't like being told what I can and can't do.'

'Is that why you made a hole in our wall? We'll have some difficulty defending that.'

'Good. Where are we being taken?'

'To see the Tuatha de Danaan again.'

'I'm a police officer from Earth,' Stevens interjected. 'I'd appreciate it if I could see someone in command around here.'

'And I'd like to see the American ambassador, David requested. 'Well, it doesn't work in the movies,'

he whispered to Jack.

'Come along,' Captain Rhys told them. 'I'll take you to the Tuatha.'

'Haven't I theen you thomewhere before?' Caeryon asked curiously.

'My god, what a memory you have!' Rhys laughed. 'This is the girl who came through the circle just a few days ago.'

'Of courthe! I remember now. Athe!'

'More or less,' Ace smiled.

'Caeryon, you grass snake, haven't you got any sibilant praying to the Land Mother that you can do?

I'm quite capable of taking these people up to the Tuatha.'

'It theemth I am redundant!' Caeryon exclaimed. 'Ath a matter of fact I do have a great many important thingth to do. I jutht conthidered it common courtethy to be the one who brought them before the Tuatha.'

'Of course it is! Now push off, will you?'

'Very well.' Caeryon strode off purposefully.

'This way.' Rhys led them on to the stairway and ushered them ahead of him, whilst he waited for the stone slab to swing shut.

'I know the way,' Ace told Stevens. 'I've been here before.'

'Whoever invented spiral staircases,' Stevens panted, 'had obviously not ... discovered the joys of ...

junk food.' He drew a sleeve across his forehead.

'Nearly at the top,' Ace told him.

At the doors to the Tuatha de Danaan's chamber, Rhys strode ahead of them and banged loudly with the butt of his crossbow. The doors were pulled open by General Nuada, looking wilder than ever.

'By Arawn's teeth, what do you want, Captain Rhys?'

'I have brought the girl Ace who helped the Ceffyl break through the wall ... '

'You've caused us a lot of trouble, girl! We may have to bring forward the evacuation substantially.'

'If Chulainn' s report is at all accurate, then we may not have enough time even for that,' Dryfid told him.

It was as though Ace had been dealt a double blow. The sight of Nuada in the doorway, bringing back her memories of the night she had wandered the corridors of Dinorben and seen a figure with wildness in his eyes; and then the news that Chulainn had reached Dinorben safely.

'And who are these others?' Nuada asked.

'Bring them in! Bring them in!' Dryfid croaked. Nuada beckoned for them all to come in and shut the large wooden doors behind them.

'Who are you?' one of the seated men asked.

Captain Rhys stepped forward. 'For some reason Emrys thought they should be brought to Tír na n-

Óg.'

'So what are their names?' Nuada bellowed.

'David Gibson,' David said waving his hand. 'This is Jack Pilgrim.'

'Hi!' Jack smiled uncertainly.

'I'm Inspector Graham Stevens of Scotland Yard Metropolitan Police Force, Paranormal Investigations Team.'

. A large title for a large man,' laughed Nuada. 'I am General Nuada. The man seated in the chair is our leader Dryfid.'

Another of the assembled men jumped up. 'I want the girl burnt. She is a witch. She deserted me and took up with the company of Ceffyl. Burn her.'

'Chulainn,' Ace gasped. Her face twisted and with a low scream she collapsed to the floor as though events had overcome her.

Stevens dropped to her side. 'What's the matter with her?'

Chulainn sneered. 'More proof that she is a witch. She cannot face the accusation.'

‘Chulainn , ' Dryfid spoke quietly. 'There is only one proof that she is a witch - the witch mark. She did not carry it when she last passed through Dinorben, but you may look again.'

Chulainn bent over and pulled Ace's hair aside. 'Nothing. Maybe they have become more adept at disguising themselves. '

'She is not a witch.'

Jack asked, 'What do you mean by witch?' .

‘All will be explained in time.'

David rubbed his hand against the back of his neck and looked down at Ace. 'We haven't got much time. We're going right back to Llanfer Ceiriog.'

'I'm afraid we cannot allow that,' Dryfid told him.

‘Ace has already explained that to us,' Stevens reminded David. 'But I'm a representative of the police force in England. Ace thought that if you could get in contact with the British government they might supply you with weapons to combat your enemies. I'm willing to act as a go-between.'

‘I fear it is too late for that. Some days ago I might have agreed to such a scheme, but now the land is growing colder, colder than it has ever been. The world is ending - the sky has fallen, maybe it will not be long before the oceans overflow their limits.'

'Superstition,' Nuada said.

'Probably, probably, but ... '

Stevens interrupted. 'And with this catastrophe you'd exile us to remain here?'

'Once we have escaped you will be allowed to return to Earth. It will be too late for you to stop us then.'

'Ace is coming round,' Jack said. He knelt down beside her and lifted her head from the floor. 'Ace, Ace, can you hear me?'

'What happened? My head hurts.'

'It was a wild party,' David said.

Stevens told her, 'You fainted.'

'Me? Faint?' Ace's voice was filled with disbelief. With a resounding crash, the council room doors were flung open. Emrys strode in, carrying a large bloodstained sack. He bore it like a trophy, and pride shone through on his ichor-streaked face.

'My lord Nuada,' he said, 'the problem has been dealt with. He poured the contents of the sack out on to the table. They skittered, twisting and turning, across its polished surface. One of them fell to the floor by Ace. She picked it up and gazed at it with horror in her eyes. Her mind grew numb and her fingers with it - so much so that the bloodied unicorn's horn slipped from her hand.

'Bat,' she whispered.

14:

The first blast threw the Doctor and Bathsheba to the ground and filled the air with an acrid smell of burning. The creature let out a wailing cry as if it was in pain. The Doctor raised his head just as a second bolt of light hit the car and ignited the petrol seeping from the damaged tank. The car was turned into a ball of flame that engulfed the creature but passed with little effect over their heads.

The Doctor stood up and looked at the burning wreckage. He seemed dazed.

'Doctor! What on earth was that?' Stuart called from the far side of the car.

'A plasma bolt,' the Doctor murmured.

Stuart joined the Doctor and Bathsheba. 'Come on, we'd better not hang around. We may not be so lucky next time.' He urged the Doctor into a stumbling run, picked up Bathsheba and followed.

A searchlight stabbed down out of the sky momentarily blinding the three travellers. Half shielding his face and still running, the Doctor tried to find its source.

'Damn, it's certain to hit us now. Bloody dragons!' Stuart swore.

'A flying rock!' Bathsheba cried, recalling her brother Gabby's words.

'What is it?' Stuart called. He shielded his eyes with his arm and strained to make out the detail of the descending object. 'Is it a dragon?'

'I very much doubt it,' the Doctor said. They had all come to a stop now. Stuart let Bathsheba stand again - there could be no more running away. It was obvious that if the thing had intended to kill them it could already have done so. The small disclike craft drifted slowly down until it settled on the ground. A door flipped open in its side and a synthesized voice called out to them. 'Enter now, there are more of the rejects in the area.'

'Well, Doctor?' Stuart asked. He waved the rifle in the direction of the craft.

'I don't think we've anything to lose. Come on, Bats.' He took Bathsheba's hand and together they ran over to the waiting vehicle. The interior was dark and Bathsheba hesitated a moment before allowing herself to be pulled in.

When all three were inside, the door closed and the interior was suffused with a low, green light which revealed a shelf around the wall. The Doctor was the first to sit down, but the others quickly followed suit when, with a slight jolt, the machine took flight.

The Doctor cleared his throat. 'May we be allowed to see our rescuer - or should that be captor?'

A panel slid aside at the front of the craft, revealing a figure hunched over a set of controls. Only the head, enclosed in a broad helmet, was visible over the low-set control position. It half turned, as if to face them, but nothing more was revealed of its features, for the front of the helmet bore a mirrorlike visor. Twin tubes ran down either side of the visor and over the creature's shoulder where, presumably, they joined some sort of gas or nutrient supply.

'I received your distress signal.' The voice was passionless, free from emotion. Stuart wondered if this were merely the effect of being electronically generated or if their pilot really spoke in such a way. His words confused Stuart somewhat. What distress signal? 'I am intrigued as to how any of you could know of intergalactic distress codes. I have not been paying much attention to exterior informational signals since the end of the experiment but I had not realized that you humans could advance so much in less than a quarter rotation of star Q76. It will make an interesting observation in my report.'

'Intergalactic distress codes?' Stuart asked the Doctor, one eyebrow raised.

'Rather more sophisticated than Samuel Morse's system,' Doctor told him. 'You said that the experiment had ended?

The helmet shifted so that it faced forward again. 'That is correct. Sociological experiment Ternog was intended to last only as long as the artificial energy supply.'

'As I thought,' the Doctor murmured. There was another bump as the craft settled on to ground again.

The interior light was extinguished and the door opened, letting in a flood of bright light. The Doctor stood and went out.

They had landed inside a large hangar. There was no apparent way in for the craft - presumably it had closed after they had entered - but a set of double doors stood shut in one corner. The hangar was cluttered with mess; stray pipes, metal crates - some closed, some offering tantalizing glimpses of their contents, from colourful, soft garments to drab but heavy tomes - and a faint odour of oil. There was a quiet but persistent hum coming from all around them and once in a while one of the many pipes which ran across the ceiling would emit a low gurgle,

A larger construction stood alongside their transport. Stuart gasped at the sight of it. Four broad black cushions supported a twisted pyramid whose edges were marked by chrome-gleaming fluting which spiralled together at the vertices. It looked almost as though it might

be ornamental, but it was pocked with small, craterlike holes. The ground underneath it was heatstained and suggested one thing to Stuart ...

'Is that a spaceship?' he asked wonderingly.

'It would appear to be equipped for interstellar travel,' the Doctor agreed. Their host appeared out of the cockpit of the smaller craft.

'Greetings.' At least eight feet tall, he towered over the Doctor, but was humanoid at first sight. Only when he moved did Stuart see the fluidity of his limbs, as though they had many joints along their length. He wore an all-encompassing suit which did not allow any glimpse of the creature within it. The twin tubes which Stuart had noted earlier merged into one and attached to a small canister which hung from a ring at the creature's side. Its fingers, encased in tight-fitting gloves, were long and spindly and danced constantly, even when the rest of the body was still. The feet were broad and platelike. There could be no doubt that this being was of alien origin; everything about it bespoke its different nature.

The Ceffyl, the Firbolg, the Fomoir, the Sidhe - all were different, but none had stirred in Stuart the revulsion which this creature so easily produced. But then, Stuart was only human and in situations which were beyond him, his prejudices never let him down.

'I have the pleasure of addressing a Troifran, I believe,' the Doctor said.

'That is correct. You are the Doctor. Your physiology is unlike the normal human physiology and yet there is no sign of my protoplasmic material in your body. This and your knowledge suggest that you are not one of the experimental subjects.'

Stuart's mind reeled. What were they talking about?

'Are you Goibhnie?' Bathsheba asked tentatively.

'That is the name by which I have come to be known,' the creature agreed.

So this, thought Stuart is the evil creature who has caused so much harm in Tír na n-Óg. This is the source of the cancer. Hardly surprising, then, that it caused such sensations of disgust in his mind, even before he knew its identity.

'Please cure my arm.' She held out her withered arm to show it to Goibhnie. He turned his head to look at it but then looked away.

'There is nothing I can do. If I had some protoplasmic material then I could perhaps correct the musculature defect, but in the time since the experiment ended the forcefield protecting the storage module has fail. There is nothing I can do,' he repeated. Was there perhaps a touch of remorse in his voice?

Bathsheba was crushed by this. 'But … but … you are Goibhnie. You must be able to help me.'

‘I am sorry.'

‘But you're a god.' She began to cry. All hope was gone now.

‘I am sorry.'

'He is no god,' the Doctor told Bathsheba. He had tried to prevent her building up her hopes, but he could see that the illusory pedestal on which she had placed Goibhnie had crumbled away into ruins.

‘He’s a scientist. Your whole world is nothing more than an experiment to him. And now the experiment is ended it holds no further interest to him. Like so many of his kind he thinks nothing of the consequences of his work.’

'That is not true,' denied Goibhnie, but there was no feeling in his words.

'No? Have you seen the suffering in Tír na n-Óg?' the Doctor said harshly. His eyes and face showed the fury which he felt inside.

‘I have been engaged in the preparations for leaving this world.'

'And you were going to leave your experimental subjects to die.’

'They live and die all the time. They lead such short lives and they die so often.'

'But never with the agonies that your lack of interest has inflicted upon them,' the Doctor told him angrily.

'Haven't you noticed the demons?' Stuart asked.

‘Demons?' Goibhnie was puzzled momentarily. 'Ah, you mean the reject material. It was unfortunate that the force field on the storage module failed. I recognized the fact only when your distress call summoned me from my preparations for departure.'

'What are the demons, anyway?' Stuart asked.

'His attempts to create life forms to populate his sociological experiment,' the Doctor said.

'That is correct. I used as a model the mythological creatures of the human species who inhabit the primary life-bearing planet in the Sol system. In my search for a suitable test location that species was suggested to me and I found their imaginative fancies so unique that I determined to see how such creatures would function under actual conditions. I took samples of the genetic material of many of that planet's creatures and then altered their forms using my protoplasmic material.'

'You seem very proud of your achievement,' the Doctor said.

'I am.'

'Then why leave them to perish?'

'The experiment is over.' Obviously this explanation seemed perfectly reasonable to Goibhnie.

'But what are the demons?' Stuart persisted.

'In my quest to reproduce the creatures which I desired for my

experiments, I made some mistakes whose psychology was entirely incorrect. They were violent, unsociable, undesirable. I consigned the rejects to the storage module. This was also a mistake, but will contribute to a refinement of my experimental technique. The pool of protoplasm was contaminated by the aberrant creations and I did not have the resources to create a surrogate human type. At first I thought that the experiment could proceed as it was, but the four basic subjects required the interaction of humans. Fortunately, at the request of Herne creature, I had set up a transmat link to the home plan of the humans and so I was able to obtain breeding stock.'

The Doctor put this in his own words. 'So you kidnapped them from their home world, got them to breed and then used them in your experiment. And now you're leaving them to die. And I suppose the excess contaminated protoplasmic material has been unleashed on Tír na n-Óg as well.'

'There is no indication of any organic material left within the storage module,' Goibhnie commented.

His silver mask concealed any regret that he might feel at this circumstance.

'So you were careless enough to let your rejects escape from their test tube. And they're violent, unsociable and undesirable. Stuart shook his head. 'When I was a student, you could always tell the ones who'd go on to become research scientists. They lacked soul, they were heartless.'

'Come here, Bathsheba, ' he said. He put his arms around her and let her sob into his side.

'It is against all regulations for me to allow the experiment to continue longer than the requisite time period.'

'But all you'd have to do would be to restock the artificial sun with fuel.'

'What are you talking about, Doctor?' Stuart asked. He could see no further point in continuing the discussion with this alien.

'His experiment was intended to last only as long as artificial sun was burning. That is why he is leaving just when Tír na n-Óg faces its greatest peril and needs him most.

'It would be highly irregular if I were to allow the experiment to continue without supervision.'

'But surely they have proved that their society is stable without your intervention?'

'That was one of the conclusions I had tentatively arrived at.'

'Well then!'

'But there is no way I could refuel the artificial energy supply.'

The Doctor made a suggestion. 'What about the fuel from your

spacecraft?'

'I have to return to Troifres.'

'Surely you have an excess of fuel.'

'It is a possibility I could look into.'

'And,' the Doctor suggested, 'you could return when the sun had run out of fuel again and observe how Tír na n-Óg had developed. Have you considered an experiment on such a grand scale?'

'No!' Despite the synthesized nature of his voice there was a touch of excitement there. 'It is an interesting concept. I could suggest it to the funding council. Please wait here, I must consider the implications.' He strode off, his legs moving in sinuous motions, and vanished through the sliding double doors.

'Doctor,' Stuart asked, 'who is this person? No, *what* is this person? He makes my flesh crawl.'

'Why, this is Goibhnie,' Bathsheba said bitterly. She pulled away from Stuart and sat on a section of thick, concertinaed piping that snaked across the grey concrete floor. 'Goibhnie who I believed in.

Goibhnie who could cure me.'

'Sometimes it's best not to believe in something too strongly. We're often disappointed by high expectations unfulfilled,' the Doctor advised her.

'How do you know so much about this creature?' Stuart asked him.

'I suspected that a Troifran might be involved ever since I saw the marks on the Firbolg. Troifran numerals are widespread in the galactic scientific community. The Troifrans themselves are terribly efficient about keeping tabs on everything they do, so everything he has created exhibits a Troifran numeral to show which experiment it was and whether or not it was a success.'

'The Troifrans,' he continued, 'are quite infamous in certain quarters, you see. They consider themselves to be a scholarly people - over a half of the surface area of their home planet Troifres is covered by a university complex - but they're terribly vulgar, always trying to do things bigger and better than the next species. I remember when they set out to prove that the universal gravity constant could vary, they built a massive gravitometer that stretched for several light years. Played havoc with numerous solar systems when they lost control of it. This whole set-up had the feel of being an enormous experiment the Troifrans.'

Stuart shook his head. 'I'm trying to take this all in, but … you're saying that this whole world is just a guinea-pig sociological test?'

'Yes.'

The arc lamps suspended from the vaulted ceiling flickered momentarily and then were restored.

Stuart looked up at the convoluted mess of dully gleaming pipes

and conduits amongst which the light wires became hopelessly entangled. The whine of power being generated elsewhere in the building rose slightly higher pitch. 'What was that?' he asked.

'By the sound of it and considering the energy consumption of matter transmission, I would imagine it was a matter transmitter being used.'

‘You mean Goibhnie's left us here? Gone to Earth?'

‘Why would he hide? He has nothing to fear from us. We are nothing.’ Bathsheba said.

'Don't denigrate yourself, Bathsheba. But I doubt he's left us, I doubt it very much. No, I should think he has considered my suggestion and decided to take it up.'

***

'My lords,' Caeryon burst through the doors of the council chamber. His face was flushed and a beatific smile brightened the whole of his visage.

‘What do you mean, Caeryon, by coming in like this?'

‘My apologies, my Lord Barras, but it is a miracle. The Land Mother has answered all our prayers.

We have been delivered from the darkness.'

'Stop babbling and tell us what you want us to know' Dryfid commanded the druid.

'My lord, Dagda's Wheel has been restored to us.'

'What?' Nuada turned on him. A wild fury blazed in his coalpit eyes.

'I was standing on the wall when suddenly all was light again and I looked to the sky and Dagda's Wheel shone as brightly as ever before.'

‘Are you sure about this?' Rhys asked sceptically. 'You haven't been taking one of your druidic potions, have you’

'Of course not, Captain Rhys! Come up and see.'

‘Yes, I think we should. And Dagda be praised if it is true,’ Dryfid said.

Nuada added 'And I'll feed your head to Arawn if it isn’t.’

'Come, come!' Caeryon beckoned. The entire council left the room and made their way up through the wall. They. commented excitedly as they passed windows through which bright sunlight streamed.

At each window they left behind someone basking in the warmth, hardly believing that such a sensation could be real.

Ignored, the four Earth people followed, not wanting to be left out of the action. Stevens supported Ace, still weak from her collapse.

'Did you notice,' Ace said, 'that Caeryon's lisp has gone? It must be the excitement.'

'Yes. What happened to you back there, Ace?'

'You saw what Emrys brought back from Earth. I had a sort of

psychic link with Bat. It's broken irretrievably now. I feel empty - as though some part of me has been taken away.' Her voice was weighted with sadness and affected Stevens strangely.

'I .. , I don't know what to say. When my wife died .... I imagine I felt much as you do now. What can I say? In time, it will pass … perhaps.'

Behind them walked Jack and David, still bemused by the turn of events. It was still something of a shock that the source of the centaur that they had found was a mysterious world of fantasy. It was something akin to finding out where babies came from.

'I mean, is it a parallel universe? Jack whispered. 'Or what?'

'Don't give me those sci-fi clichés, Jack. There's a perfectly reasonable explanation for all of this.'

'So what is it?'

'Hey, how would I know? Since when have I been perfectly reasonable? It's strange, you know ...'

'Oh, yeah? I hadn't noticed.'

'No, no!' David said. 'There's something about this place. I can't quite put my finger on it. I wish I could figure it out.'

A silence fell over the ascending group as they emerged out into the open air as though the brightness was stilling the air and muffling all noise. Caeryon turned, faced them all and spread his arms wide.

'Behold! Dagda's Wheel! Fall down on your knees, and worship the Land Mother!'

'Be silent, Caeryon,' Nuada ordered.

'Silent? This is a time for rejoicing, we have been saved by Dagda. He has judged us worthy.' He turned to the sun and held out his hands in supplication. 'We should shout!'

Even as they stood, a small bird began to trill its song from where it had rested momentarily on the grey rock of the wall. With a flurry of wings it flew from its perch and settled on Caeryon's hand, then resumed its hymn of joy.

Dryfid shook his head in wonder. He felt tears begin to prick at his eyes as the wonderful refreshing light flowed around and into his body. He rocked back and forth on his heels, revelling in the incredibly sensuous, almost sexual thrill that coursed through his old body. He too, like Caeryon, wanted to cry out to the beautiful azure blue sky and praise the gods. It didn't matter that the air was as chill as Fomoir steel, for the heat sent by Dagda warmed his flesh and, far more importantly, rekindled the fire in his soul.

'This is indeed a time for rejoicing,' he agreed. 'Not only has Dagda's Wheel been restored, so has our High Druid's faith. Rejoice, friends! We must make all haste to negotiate a peace with our fellow Tír na n-Óg-ians. There is no longer any need to leave our home.'

'You forget the demons, Dryfid,' Barras of Teirion warned.

'Cast away that sad face, Barras. United we can drive them back. They are still scattered and we may hunt them down.' The return of the sun had invigorated Dryfid considerably - all the despair of the time of darkness had evaporated in the light.

'Let us descend to the gates. Fling them wide and demonstrate our friendship to the assembled armies.

Come!' He led the council back into the darkness of the wall.

Ace, gazing at the panoramic view of Tír na n-Óg which had hitherto been hidden, and marvelling at its beauty, found herself being left behind. She looked out across the marvellous snowclad hills and felt for a moment the magic that she had experienced when she and the Doctor had first rode out across the land. But the feeling was soured by what had happened to Bat. Ace cast a glance towards the towering quartz mountains in the south, but then her gaze was drawn northwards, past the millling armies at the foot of the wall and settling on the barely visible outskirts of the forest of Coed. Her thoughts reached out across the miles, searching for the Doctor amongst the trees, but then she turned on her heel and hurried after the others down the stairs.

She discovered that she was looking at a familiar back. It wore a chainmail vest and brown hair hung in coils around its shoulders. She shivered at her remembrance of the other time she had encountered this man - General Nuada his name was, she now recalled. She deadened her footfalls, hoping that he wouldn't turn his wild eyes upon her.

But when he split away from the main group she felt bound to follow him. He hadn't joined in the general good humour that the appearance of Dagda's Wheel had instigated. Ace knew that something was going on here.

Just as she had before, she followed him by the clop-clop sound of his wooden sandals striking the floor, and just as before .she managed to lose him when the echoes confused her and sent her off into the maze of corridors. She cursed her bad luck in choosing the wrong path, but determined to find where he was heading.

She came upon him in much the same position he had been in that night, standing at the window gazing outwards. The sunlight fell on to his face but didn't seem to illuminate it. He was mumbling incoherently to himself, his head swaying from side to side. Ace crept a little closer to try and hear what he was saying. It seemed that he was calling to something, but she couldn't be sure what.

Suddenly, as if exhausted, Nuada fell back from the window. He reeled about in the small space of the corridor and then collapsed on the floor, his chest heaving.

Ace came out of hiding and knelt down by him. His eyes were shut and his breathing had slowed now. It was as though he had passed out. Automatically she reached forward to loosen the tightly constricting chainmail vest where its collar embraced his neck. She slipped her fingers into it and tried to find some way of unfastening it. Working her hands around it she brushed back the dark mane of hair from his neck.

With a gasp of surprise she stood back from him. Chulainn had told her about the witch mark and what it meant. How could a member of the Tuatha de Danaan carry the mark on his neck? Nuada was a witch, of that she was certain. Did it mean anything? She didn't know.

But when his eyes snapped open and blazed with red fury, she understood completely why Chulainn feared the witches as much.

15:
Dagda's Wheel

The door at the end of the hangar slid open silently. Goibhnie strode in and halted before his waiting guests. The light gleamed brightly on the reflective visor of his helmet and his fingers moved in unceasing agitation.

'I have decided to adopt your suggestion. It will be interesting to observe how the experimental subjects respond to life without any guiding influence.'

'Might it not be a good idea to reconfine the reject materials?' the Doctor suggested to Goibhnie.

'That would be an essential procedure for the continuing successful development of the experiment. I have issued instructions to my mobile surveillance units to locate the reject material.'

'What's he talking about?' asked Bathsheba.

'Yes, why can't he talk normally?' Stuart agreed. It irritated him that the alien could not make himself clearly understood.

The Doctor explained Goibhnie's words. 'He meant that he's using his dragons to locate the demons.'

'Dragons?' Goibhnie exclaimed, with some surprise filtering through his voice synthesizer. 'That is the name that the Herne creature used for my surveillance units.'

'Herne,' the Doctor mused. 'Yes, where does he fit into your experiment?'

'He does not. I created the Herne specimen in an experiment on Troifres. My initial research for creating a sociological world model involved work on a wide range of protoplasmic material types. One of these, the basic model which I eventually used to create subject species number three, in the course of irradiation sequencing

underwent a severe mutation producing a human-type being and the Herne creature. Unexpected and contravening the laws of conservation of mass and energy though this was, it was nothing to the fact that I later discovered that the Herne creature perceives effect before cause, thus running against the psychological, expansionist and thermodynamical arrows of time. It was the Herne creature who gave the initial suggestion that I should look to the legends of the Sol system for my experimental model.'

The Doctor considered this explanation and related it back to what he had seen of Herne. 'So he perceives effect before cause? That would explain a lot.'

'Would it?' Stuart asked. 'Are you saying that this Herne bloke goes backwards in relation to everyone else?'

'That's a very succinct way of putting it. I wonder to what extent he has a true contra-temporal existence.'

'He has resisted all my attempts to analyse him,' Goibhnie told the Doctor.

'Hardly surprising if he knows in advance the ways in which you would no doubt test him.'

'Perhaps that is the case.' Goibhnie seemed annoyed. 'Now, if you would come with me I shall view the locations of the rejects.' He led them out of the hangar, along a featureless corridor and into a large dark room, one wall of which gave off a dim luminescence. The other walls were bare.

'Seating for three human subjects,' Goibhnie commanded and three forms rose out of the floor. Stuart eyed them with interest. There had been no indication - no cracks, no panels – that the chairs had been concealed there; they had simply extruded themselves and were continuous with the material of the floor. The Doctor sat on one of them and it instantly contoured itself to fit him perfectly. Bathsheba and Stuart followed suit.

'World map of experiment code Ternog, surveillance unit locations.' The wall suddenly became a screen showing an overview of the entire world of Tír na n-Óg.

Bathsheba leaned forward excitedly, hardly noticing that her seat changed to accommodate her new posture. She had seen a map of Tír na n-Óg drawn by her brother David and so she could pick out familiar places. A bright red light glowed where Dinorben lay and acted as a reference point for Bathsheba. To the north of Dinorben were the forest of Coed, the mountains of the Allan Clwff and the land of the Clyr. To the south lay the forest of the Sidhe, the land of Teirion, which the people of lord Barras and the Firbolg hotly disputed, and the mountains where the Fomoir dwelled. To the west of Dinorben, beyond the southernmost extremities of the mountains of

the Allan Clwff were the Marches which stretched for more than a hundred miles before they reached the sea. To the east lay farmlands, then a low range of mountains and then nothing, a barren wasteland which had never been crossed and hence was unmapped by the cartographers of Tír na n-Óg. On this map it was equally devoid of features.

Over the surface of the map moved thirty or so white pinpricks of light - the dragons, if Bathsheba understood what had been happening correctly.

'Relay targeting information from surveillance units to screen, including last known locations and extrapolated movement patterns,' Goibhnie instructed.

A host of green dots leapt on to the screen. Most of them were north of Dinorben, and to Bathsheba's eye they appeared to be making towards it.

Goibhnie turned to the Doctor, 'This is the present situation. As you can see they are too widely spread at the moment ... '

'They've been causing havoc all over the place,' the Doctor told him.

'. . . but computer analysis suggests that there is some general movement towards the transmat device. This creates an ideal solution to the problem. If, as would seem to be apparent, for some reason the rejects are attempting to escape from the Ternog experiment, then we need merely reprogram the transmat device to transport them back to the storage module.

'Aren't you forgetting something?' the Doctor asked.

'I hardly think so. I am a trained scientist, and I take into account all factors when preparing experiments. The possibilities for experimental error are so great that such an approach is essential in even the simplest technique.'

'But the semiorganic silicate computer transfer device is in the middle of a large population at present. For the demons to reach it they would have to pass through that population.'

'They'd wipe it out,' Stuart said.

'I do not see that as a problem. I can restock from the original source world.'

'How can you be so callous?' Stuart asked. 'These are lives we're talking about. Real lives - not fairy tale monsters … or aliens.'

'It is not a question of emotionalism,' Goibhnie rebuked him, 'but of experimental logistics. It would be far simpler in terms of my present resources if I were to take such action as I have planned.'

'But,' said the Doctor, 'you aren't taking into account the development of the human species on Earth since you last obtained specimens. When was that? A hundred and fifty years ago, perhaps?

Three thousand Troifran standard time units?'

'I do not understand the relevance of this.'

'The human race has become much more organized. They are going to notice if you abscond with a few thousand people and I'm afraid that that would be against the Galactic Constitutional Regulations regarding interference with species - paragraph #4654, subsection (wegla) - which the Troifran committee ratified some time ago. Earth is widely regarded as one of the causal nexus points in this galaxy and your interference would not be acceptable - you'll have to come up with something better than that.'

Goibhnie did not reply, staying motionless as he considered the Doctor's words. His hands flickered impatiently while he thought. Bathsheba rose and went to sit by the Doctor. Eventually Goibhnie asked tentatively, 'What do you suggest?'

The Doctor smiled broadly. 'I suggest that we go out in the field and review the situation as it stands.'

He rose beckoned for Goibhnie to lead the way.

***

Ace didn't have time to flinch back any further before one of Nuada's thick-fingered hands clamped around her leg.

'Get off me!' she cried, kicking out at his chest. His other hand reached across and took hold of her ankle. She lashed out again, but in her trainers it was like kicking a tree. Nuada' chain mail clinked as he pulled himself up, using Ace's leg for leverage.

'So I've found a spy!' he snarled. Ace swung her fist into the side of his head in another desperate attempt to dislodge him. He flung his weight forwards and knocked her to the floor. 'Little demon, aren't you?' He held her down with one knee in her stomach and her arms pressed to the floor by his strong hands.

'Get off!' Ace was scared now. She struggled to get into a position where she could use her legs to attack him. He dug his knee in further.

'You've seen my secret.' Was it just a breeze that sent his hair writhing and made it look as though there was something shifting under the skin of his face? 'What should I do with you?' He blinked, and for a moment his eyes gleamed like fire. 'I can't let you go. The Tuatha wouldn't tolerate one of their number being ... ' He laughed, a harsh doglike sound, and again there was that horrible impression of something inside his face. '… I suppose they'd call me a witch. If only they could know.'

'Chulainn told me,' Ace gasped, 'that some witches could change their form. What do you look like under that mask?'

'Oh this is the real me. Or a part of the real me. I had a lot of contributions to what I am now. Perhaps you would like to contribute?'

'Do I get a badge for my jacket?' She brought a knee up into the small of his back. It sent him sprawling over her, but he no longer gripped her and she was able to squirm free from him. She pushed herself to her feet and sprinted off down the corridor. His imprecations were loud in her ears as she dodged down a side passage. She went down the first set of stairs that she found and hoped that she could lose him in the maze. At first the noise of his feet striking the ground sounded close behind her but after a number of quick direction changes the sound of his pursuit faded.

Feeling safe, Ace paused in her flight and pulled off her trainer. She tenderly tested the joints of her big toe – those kicks against Nuada's armour had hurt like hell - and thankfully they seemed to be intact, though the throbbing refused to go away. She slipped her foot back into the shoe and pulled the laces tight.

She had to find Dryfid and warn him of the demon in wolf's clothing, but she had no idea how to get out. Once again she found herself wandering through the corridors of Dinorben. Why was this place always so empty? She couldn't find a single person, but surely there must be someone who could take her to the Tuatha. She found herself in a corridor which had alcoves for windows - she had obviously disoriented herself thoroughly, for she was sure she couldn't be anywhere near the outer walls.

She stepped into one of the alcoves and looked out. It was dark - had the sun vanished again? - but pushing herself further into the narrow slit, she saw sunlight shining at one end of the darkness.

Beautiful, fresh, winter morning sunlight. The window looked into the large tunnel through the wall and she could now see figures marching towards the huge wooden gates.

'Hey! You lot!' she called, hoping that they could hear her. Suddenly a heavily callused hand closed over her mouth.

'Found you!'

Dryfid led them down the muddy tunnel with Cyllell at his side. When he reached the gates he stopped and the mob of people who had gathered stopped a few paces behind him, jostling each other good-naturedly.

He stepped forward and placed one hand on either side of the crack which separated the two gates.

'Open!' he called loudly. Men hidden in the wall began to operate winches and a handful of soldiers came forward and lent their weight to the effort. When the doors were fully opened, all fell back behind Dryfid and once more he strode forward. In the light at the end of the tunnel he could see that he had a welcoming committee. Cyllell inched closer to his side as he came within hailing range of them. Dryfid stopped and whispered a few words to his fellow members of

the Tuatha de Danaan and then walked on, alone except for the faithful wolf.

He stopped a few yards from the waiting emissaries of the assembled armies. The light from Dagda's Wheel was captured by his silver hair and made it gleam like a halo around his head.

'May we talk of peace?' he asked. The Firbolg, Rhiad of Teirion, stepped forward. His streaming grey mane fell like a waterfall down his back. His proud chest was swollen, filled with the glorious tasting air.

'I have been designated to speak on the behalf of Ydvort of the Sidhe, Brawd of the Fomoir and my lord, Cerdd of the Firbolg of Teirion. You have acted dishonourably, Dryfid. What is ours is yours, and what is yours is ours. You refused to allow to retreat from the enemy because you feared for yourselves.

This we cannot forgive.'

Dryfid dropped his head and shame filled his heart, but there was warmth coursing in his veins and the apology came more easily to him than it would have to a lesser man. 'I admit that we are guilty of everything you accuse us of. But I ask you now may we not unite and fight the demons now that Dagda has shown his favour and returned his wheel to the sky? Now we need not cower in the darkness, like troglodytes under fallen skies of stone.'

'Do you speak for all of your people, Dryfid of Dinorben?' Rhiad asked harshly.

'I lead the Tuatha de Danaan. I never wanted to leave Tír na n-Óg. We love the land. For centuries it has nourished us and kept us safe within its tender bosom. The fear was too great for weak men of muscle and sinew. I am sorry for what happened. I cannot begin to convey my full regrets.'

A smile cracked Rhiad's stony facade. 'You speak truly, Dryfid. We too love the land and want to see it restored. We must ask one thing of you if the peace is to be complete.'

'Ask anything if it will bring our peoples closer together. '

'It will. We ask you to destroy the route to the place called Earth. Let there be no more talk of desertion and the land will be united.'

Dryfid stepped forward and embraced the centaur. 'Rhiad, it is good to know that we may be friends again.'

Rhiad returned the embrace but then pushed Dryfid to arm's length. The expression on his face was grave. 'There is one other matter.'

'Yes?'

'Our united front against the demons will come sooner than you imagined. Our scouts have reported that the demons are moving towards Dinorben. We must ask that you admit our armies so that we

may fight.'

'But of course. That would be the proof of our mutual trust.'

'Dryfid, with you there is no need for proof of such trust. But we must make haste.' Rhiad turned to his two cohorts 'Does all that has been agreed satisfy you?'

The Sidhe, unfamiliar to Dryfid, gave a curt nod. Carreg, the Fomoir, grunted gutterally in affirmation.

'Then return to your leaders and prepare them for entry again to Dinorben. We must make haste.

Farewell Dryfid, may we meet again shortly.' They clasped hands momentarily and the then parted.

Dryfid returned to the expectant crowd. 'We all want peace,' he told them, 'but the demons aim to attack Dinorben. We must allow the armies of our friends to enter the enclosure so that we may defend ourselves. I, Dryfid, have given my agreement to this plan. Now, back to your posts and prepare for battle!'

Jack and David were carried back inside Dinorben with the mass of people. They had lost Stevens and had no idea what was going on.

'What do you think David! Should we try and get back to the stone circle?'

'Where's Ace?' David asked.

'What? I don't know.'

'I didn't see her down there. I think we ought to look for her.'

'David!' Jack waved a hand in front of David's eyes. 'David! How long have you known the girl?

You're already chasing after her!'

'Come on. I think she must still be inside the castle.'

'Jack!' a voice called. Jack looked around and saw Stevens waving to them from the far side of the crowd. 'Where are you going?'

'David's got some idea into his head about looking for Ace. I…'

'Good idea. You try and find her. She's one of the few people who'll be able to explain all this to us.'

Jack shook his head 'Bunch of crazies;' he said to himself as he hurried after David.

Just as the return of the sun had melted the unwilling enmity between the humans and the non-humans of Tír na n-Óg, so it melted the snow which had settled over the ground over the last few days The earth was churned up into a morass of mud by the hurried preparations to enter Dinorben. Even inside Dinorben, where conditions were already overcrowded, there was a movement of tents further towards the back of the enclosure.

The Fomoir, their limbs already stiffening as their minds reacted to the appearance, near its zenith, of Dagda's Wheel, were first to enter.

Some stragglers only just made it into the valley and had to be carried on carts away from where they blocked the entrance tunnel. The Sidhe came in next and swarmed up on to the wall and prepared their weapons for combat. Finally the Firbolg rode in and gathered around the tunnel - they were unable to man the defences on the wall and would provide a shield should the demons break through the gate.

With everyone inside the gates were swung shut. Dryfid was worried that there might be some ill feeling, but the threat of an attack seemed to have staved off any of the immediate repercussions of the siege.

Stevens eased himself on to the top of the wall just as the first call went up that a demon had been sighted. He was far too exhausted after going up and down so many flights of stairs and merely collapsed in a quivering, sweaty heap against a convenient wall of grey rock. But his interest was piqued by everything that had been going on around him and his curiosity forced him to rise so that he could get a glimpse of this ferocious opponent. At the moment it was just a speck on the plain of slushy ground, but it was being joined by more and more of its fellows. Stevens cursed the fact that his binoculars were back in his car and strained his eyes to try and pick out some detail. One of the Sidhe bustled past him clutching a bundle of arrows under each arm; further along the wall a mangonel was being prepared for action and on the lower level a vat of oil was having fires stoked underneath it.

Captain Rhys emerged from the entrance to the interior of the wall, saw Stevens and came over to him.

'What are you doing up here?' he asked.

'Everybody seemed to have lost interest in myself and my friends, so I just followed the flow.'

'You should get below. We don't need bystanders to hinder operations up here. '

'I'd rather stay and watch.'

'Exactly - and you'd get in the way. Soldier! Yes, you there. Escort this man down to the civilians'

encampment and get someone to look after him.'

'Yes, sir, I. .. '

He was interrupted by a cry that went up from the soldiers on the lower tier of the wall. Rhys and Stevens turned to see what the commotion was about. In the far distance above the advancing demons, hovered something else, black against the clear blue sky. It too was heading towards Dinorben, but faster than the demons.

'What is it?' Stevens asked. He couldn't believe they had planes or helicopters in Tír na n-Óg,

'By all that's ... ' Rhys spat. 'It is the arch-traitor Goibhnie come to lead the attack of his agents against us.' He forgot the presence of Stevens and turned to shout to the squad of men and Sidhe who were manning the enormous bolt-flinger.

'Get that thing ready,' he shouted. 'We'll take the fiend out before he even gets close.'

One of the huge wooden bolts was loaded into place and the crank turned to prepare it for firing. It did not appear to Stevens that the machine could possibly work, but presumably these people knew what they were at. Dryfid and one of the Sidhe came up to Rhys.

'What are you doing, Captain Rhys?' Dryfid asked.

'I'm not going to let Goibhnie gloat over our destruction,' Rhys snarled.

'Is that why he has come?' the Sidhe asked.

'With all due respect, my lord Ydvort, there can be no doubt about it.'

'Captain Rhys, we should not act too hastily. Let us see what Goibhnie intends before we strike at him. Maybe, as in days of old, he has come to lend us some help. '

'Have you forgotten what he did to our troops whom we sent to talk to him when the darkness began?'

'Of course I have not, Captain. General Nuada has never let us forget.'

'Well then.'

'Captain, I am the leader of the Tuatha de Danaan,' Dryfid reminded him.

'I take orders from General Nuada, sir.'

'But Nuada is not present,' Ydvort told him. 'In such circumstances, surely your people's leader may command you.'

'Yes, sir. But I intend to find General Nuada.' He stormed off.

Dryfid went up to the men on the bolt-flinger. 'Relieve some of the tension in this thing. We don't want it going off accidentally, do we?'

Stevens approached Dryfid and tapped him on the shoulder. 'Excuse me, sir?'

'Yes, what is it? You ... you are one of the Earth people, are you not? I am surprised you did not use the changed circumstances to return to your world.'

'I find all of this far too interesting. What is this Goibhnie thing that is corning here?'

'I haven't time to answer questions. I have many things to do. ' He turned and looked out across the plain. Stevens followed the direction of his gaze to the flying thing. He wondered what it was that could cause such conflicting emotions of hatred from Captain Rhys and the yearning love that he had heard in Dryfid's voice.

David seemed to have some idea of where he was going, for at times he would stride ahead, leaving Jack behind. At other times, though, he would pause inexplicably at a bend in a passageway and immediately double back without a word to Jack.

'David, will you stop doing that?'

David took a quick right turn. 'Doing what?' he called back over his shoulder.

Jack rushed forward and took hold of David's shoulder to top him. 'Rushing off ahead of me. I mean, what are you doing? You said we were looking for Ace, but you keep ignoring one corridor and then going halfway up another and then switching direction. '

'We are looking for Ace. I'm fairly sure she's this way.' He pointed off down the passage.

'What do you mean, you're fairly sure she's this way? How can you tell?'

'I've just got this feeling, Jack. Maybe it's her animal magnetism, but it's like she's calling to me. And I'm fairly sure she's calling me this way.'

‘Are you sure it's her? I mean, it might be the tooth fairy.’

‘Hey, I’m not talking bull, Jack. Come on, she's this way.' He pulled loose of Jack and almost ran up the corridor. Jack gave an exasperated slap to his forehead but followed his friend. What else could he do?

The passage ended at a cluster of doors. David looked briefly at them and chose the middle door. He took hold of the black metal ring handle and twisted it. He felt the latch on the other side lift and so he pushed the door open.

Jack peered over his shoulder into the darkness which the torches lining the passageway barely penetrated.

'She's not in there, David,' he said smugly. 'Come on, let's use a more methodical way of ... '

'Come in,' a voice commanded from the darkness. It was low and gravelly. 'Come in, both of you. '

'Who is that?' Jack asked, but David had already entered. Jack swore, pulled a torch off the wall and followed him in.

'There you are, Jack, I told you she was here.'

Jack only had time to register that Ace's mouth was gagged before the torch was swept out of his hand and the door pushed shut behind him. He spun round to see who his assailant was.

'Well, well,' Nuada chuckled, 'this is a surprise. I hadn't expected my call to summon Earth people.

My dear,' he said to Ace, 'one of your friends is a witch.'

Jack's mind reeled - David had said he'd felt someone was calling

him.

'Chrissakes, David, you said it was Ace's animal magnetism.'

Ace grunted incoherently through the rag tied over her mouth. Jack edged over to her and when Nuada did nothing, he freed her. She stood up and rubbed her arms to restore her circulation.

'You scumbag,' she spat at Nuada. He laughed and then stabbed the flaming torch at her face. She reeled back.

'Now then. I wonder which of your friends has a mark upon his neck.'

Jack remembered David showing him the unusual birth mark. 'David,' he whispered. Why didn't he move? He'd stood there staring at Nuada almost since they'd come into the room.

David's mind was elsewhere, hidden memories rising to torment him. They weren't his memories, they belonged to someone. .. something else.

A hell of teeth and claws that lasted for eternity, bound in the subterranean cave-pit amongst the amorphous ever-shifting shapes. . . a momentary lessening of the pressure. . . a release into liquid ...

rising to the surface alone ... the light, burning at first but then. . . attacking the flying creature and assimilating it ... the absorption of the small furry vertebrate ... a pulling across the land, calling him from afar ... the long journey that lasted many days. . . the tumbling transition to another world ... the search amongst the woods ... discovering the intelligent being and entering it ... dormancy, years of dormancy ... and now awakening. .. glorious awakening ...

16:

The details of the flying machine were gradually resolved as it approached the ramparts of Dinorben. It was roughly ovoid in shape - a series of flat panels ran around the lower edge and were surmounted by a gleaming dome. It emitted a low droning sound and left behind a slowly dissipating trail of water droplets that gleamed brightly in the rays of the sun. It passed over the valley and then, rapidly descending, it headed towards the wall.

'There, you see, Ydvort,' Dryfid said, twisting his hair around his fingers, 'Goibhnie would hardly place himself in the hands of his enemy, would he?'

'It could be a double bluff, my friend,' Ydvort counselled.

Dryfid tugged his hand free from his beard and patted Ydvort on the back. 'I am glad I do not have a mind like yours, Ydvort. Your own cunning makes you read too much into other people's actions.

Goibhnie is our friend. Clear a space, you men, clear a space so that Goibhnie may return to Dinorben and the embrace of the Land Mother.'

Ydvort shook his head. 'We shall see whether he returns as a friend.'

Stevens pushed his way through the milling soldiers and gazed up at the falling aircraft. The sound rose to a higher pitch as its descent was slowed and it settled softly on to the rough stone of Dinorben. A door flipped open in the side and Stevens held his breath wondering what new marvel would emerge. It was rather a disappointment that a small man in a brown jacket, a garish sweater and darkly tartaned trousers should be the occupant. He gave a small wave and greeted the crowd.

'Hello there, I hadn't expected quite such a reception.'

Dryfid was the first to speak. 'Doctor,' he choked, 'this is a surprise.'

'I don't suppose you thought you'd see me again. Where's Nuada?' the Doctor asked casually.

Another man came out. Younger than the first one, wearing jeans and a body-warmer, he carried a rifle in one hand and blinked as he emerged into the sunlight.

'And Stuart Taylor!' Dryfid exclaimed. Stevens pushed his way to the front.

'Mr Taylor the vet?' he asked.

'That's right,' Stuart replied with some surprise.

'I'm Inspector Stevens. I don't know if you recall, but you called me to tell me that you'd found a unicorn.'

Stuart laughed. 'Sounded a bit crackpot at the time.'

Stevens shrugged and gestured around himself. 'Who am I to deny the facts'

Next out was a young girl, dressed like the people of Dinorben. She cowered behind the Doctor. 'This is Bathsheba,' he said, 'her family were killed by demons.'

'But where is Goibhnie?' Dryfid asked. 'This is his chariot. '

'I am here,' Goibhnie's electronically enhanced voice boomed out. 'I am assessing the data regarding the movements of the reject material.'

'Goibhnie, my friend … reject material?'

'That's demons to you,' Stuart said.

The Doctor smiled at the onlookers. 'We've come to help you.'

Captain Rhys pushed through the crowd. 'Why? Why should you want to help us? And why did Goibhnie desert us for so long? Why has he only just decided to help us?'

There were scattered mutters of agreement. The Doctor raised his hands to silence them. 'I'm helping because I'm an inveterate interferer, and Goibhnie wants the world of Tír na n-Óg to continue.'

'Goibhnie is a traitor.'

'Rhys! Stop this foolishness,' Dryfid commanded. 'We have had too much hatred. It is obvious to me that Goibhnie was not allowed to help us sooner because Dagda was testing us. Is that not right, Doctor?

'Well, he did have his mind on other things. But we are here to help you now.'

'Let Goibhnie tell us so himself,' Rhys snarled.

'We are here to help you,' Goibhnie said, stooping to come out of the craft. 'Greetings, Dryfid.'

'Greetings, Goibhnie. The Tuatha welcomes you. What are we to do? The demons are preparing to attack.'

'I suggest that we descend to the ground. We can't do anything about the demons from up here,' the Doctor said.

'Well?' Dryfid looked to Goibhnie.

'The Doctor has a good grasp of scientific technique. I am prepared to follow his advice. Come!'

'My lords, Herne approaches,' a soldier shouted. They turned to look and saw that a glowing figure was indeed approaching at some speed.

'It seems we are all to face the demons together,' Dryfid said.

'We cannot let him through the gates,' Captain Rhys said. 'Even if Goibhnie does not seek to betray us, we cannot endanger our position further by opening the gates. There are already demons at the walls.'

Stevens turned from his intense examination of the figure and

asked, 'Why is he running backwards?'

'That's because he moves through time in the opposite direction to everyone else,' Stuart told him.

'No, it isn't,' the Doctor said.

Stuart gaped. 'What?'

'When I first met Herne he moved in the way one would expect a normal person to move. Goibhnie, has Herne ever acted like this before?'

'There does seem to be something unusual about his gait,' Goibhnie admitted.

The Doctor and Dryfid, followed by their companions, descended to the lower tier of the wall so that they could keep Herne in view. Near to the foot of the wall he collapsed and for a moment the light that he emitted grew dim. Herne lay still.

'What's happened to him?' Dryfid asked and then his eyes widened as, suddenly, Herne rose rapidly towards them.

'He's flying,' Bathsheba said. 'How's he doing that?'

'Search me,' Stuart said. 'Doctor?'

'True contra-temporal existence - even to the extent of disobeying fundamental laws of physics.

Fascinating. Stand back!' the Doctor commanded.

Herne appeared over the edge of the wall. The surprise in the eyes of the watchers was mirrored in his. He fell forward into the Doctor's arms and the Doctor suddenly felt the temporal field of localized space moving as if it were a carpet being beaten.

'I would advise a cautious attitude to the Herne being,' Goibhnie said. 'He appears to have lost control of certain of his metabolic processes. His body is releasing random bursts of chronons and antichronons.'

The Doctor supported Herne away from the edge of the wall and then lowered him to the ground.

'Interaction with a body moving in the opposite direction in time. An interesting process.'

'Now we must descend to the ground level and devise a plan to deal with the reject material.'

'Can we do nothing for Herne?' asked Dryfid.

'Goibhnie,' the Doctor said, 'you and I are the only ones who won't be affected by Herne's unstable state. Help me carry him down.'

'Very well, but I suggest we hurry. The combined mass of the reject material could present an overwhelming force.'

They met a messenger hurrying up as they descended through the wall. He was flustered and worried looking.

'My lord Dryfid, some fighting has broken out at the gate. General

Nuada and two of the Earth people set a wolf on some of the Firbolg.'

'What? By Dagda, what does Nuada think he's up to? His paranoia has driven him too far. We must stop him'

'Earth people?' the Doctor asked. 'Not a girl, about so high, propensity for using slang?'

'A girl and a boy,' the messenger agreed.

'Why can't you keep out of trouble, Ace? You should've known better than to get involved with Nuada.'

'What do you mean, Doctor?'

'Haven't you realized, Dryfid? Nuada's story about being attacked by demons when he went to see Goibhnie was just nonsense. He was the one who told you that Goibhnie had betrayed you, he was the one who was encouraging you to fight with your fellow creatures. I thought it was obvious. We must get down there as fast as possible. Goibhnie, I have a plan. Let's leave Herne here. We can deal with him later, or earlier, depending on your point of view.'

'They've gone down to the gate,' the Firbolg told Dryfid, pointing down the tunnel. 'We did not want to fire upon him as we feared it might cause a reopening of hostilities between our peoples, but his beast attacked several of my soldiers.'

'Beast?' asked the Doctor. 'Why do you call it that?'

'It had the appearance of a wolf, but it was not a wolf. I fear that it was a demon.'

'A demon?' Dryfid asked. 'That's impossible. You must be mistaken.'

'I need no more evidence than that which my eyes supplied me with. Do you call me a liar, sir?' The Firbolg's hands went to his weapons.

'No, no, of course not. I merely meant ... '

'Dryfid, isn't it obvious that something is amiss with Nuada?'

'Has anyone checked his neck recently?' Stuart asked.

Dryfid was shocked. 'You cannot mean that General Nuada is a witch? That would be … no!'

'Whatever the case, Stuart, I think that we can put your tranquilizers to good use.'

'But Doctor, I can't shoot it in there. It's far too dark. I wouldn't stand a chance in hell of hitting anything.'

'You plan to shoot something?' Goibhnie asked. 'I can adjust my vision to all wavelengths of the electromagnetic spectrum.'

'Can you fire a gun?'

'Let me see.' He took the rifle and looked at it interestedly.

'You line up the sights here ... ' Stuart demonstrated. 'And squeeze this trigger.'

'It seems simple enough.'

'What are we waiting for then? Let's do it.'

'Wait, Stuart,' the Doctor said, 'I'll come with you. Just let me organize things down here. Goibhnie, will the transmat be affected if we dig up the stones and position them on the opposite walls of this tunnel?'

'The coordinate settings would have to be altered.'

'Yes, yes, that's obvious. We don't want to send the demons to Earth. You must reprogram them so that they replace the demons in the storage module.'

'That will be easy.'

'Good! Dryfid, can you arrange for the two largest stones in the stone circle to be brought here?'

'Yes, I'll see to it right away. But ... '

'Don't argue, just do it.'

'Doctor,' Goibhnie interrupted, 'the transmat must be deactivated before they can be moved.'

'I can do that. You must go and deal with Nuada. Stuart, you go with him.'

'I'll come too,' Stevens said.

The Doctor looked puzzled. 'Who are you?'

Stevens was slightly crestfallen that his presence had been overlooked. 'Inspector Stevens, Scotland Yard.'

'Paranormal Investigations Team?'

'You've heard of me!'

'No,' the Doctor shook his head, 'but I'm sure I will.' He patted his pockets and took out the spare tranquillizer darts. ‘Here you are, Goibhnie, you'd better take these. You may need them.'

He pressed them into Goibhnie's outstretched hand and turned to Dryfid. 'Come along. There is very little time to lose.'

At first it was only a trickle - the fleet of foot, the better positioned, those who had been prepared - but before long they poured on to the plain in front of Dinorben. A mass of distorted limbs, misshapen torsos, swollen faces with serrated teeth ready to rip and tear and chew. Some ran on four legs, others flew. Those which had been human occasionally took stumbling steps on two legs. All of them moved towards Dinorben.

The most horrifying thing about them was not the way their bodies sprouted uncontrollably, nor was it the way, occasionally, one would absorb another to make itself more powerful, leaving behind ashen, brittle remains. The most horrifying thing about them, as Ace would later tell the Doctor, was the terrible turmoil in their minds. A thousand minds crying out with an evil and loathing which even a telepathic inept could sense. Every one was psychotic, disturbed because of the living infection that encompassed their bodies and

souls. They ran with murderous intent and bayed for blood.

Inside the encampment, the Sidhe waited nervously, their bushy tails flicking back and forth in distracted movements. The Firbolg polished their swords and made honourable pacts between families.

Even the Fomoir, their minds dulled by the soporific effects of the reborn sun, stirred restlessly - no worse fate could be conceived than to look on helplessly as others were slaughtered.

Stuart and Inspector Stevens followed Goibhnie into the dangerous blackness of the tunnel. A single torch burnt smokily at the entrance and Stuart took it from its bracket. Orange and red reflections shimmered up and down Goibhnie's side. Stuart suddenly shivered at the thought of what the alien might look like inside his protective suit - but, even more so, what lay at the end of the tunnel sent a chill wave across his flesh.

The small amount of light afforded by the torch made the darkness ahead seem all the more dense.

Animal sounds emanated from the darkness and there was a crunching under foot. Stuart looked down briefly - bones - and then concentrated on what was before him.

'Can you see anything?' he asked quietly.

'My perceptive functioning is slightly marred by the heat source you are carrying but I can detect three small organisms and one large organism. I would suggest that you extinguish your firebrand so that they do not have so much warning of our presence. I should go on alone.'

The two men exchanged a glance - both wanted to continue.

Stuart dropped the torch to the ground where it sputtered out. 'No, we'll keep with you.'

Stevens panicked momentarily at the silence and the thought that Goibhnie might have slipped away, but his eyes rapidly adjusted and picked out the thin shape beside him.

'Follow then. '

In front of them they heard a loud impact and the groan of wood under stress.

'They're trying to break open the doors,' Stuart observed. 'Can you shoot from here?'

‘My chances of disabling them would be appropriately high. '

Well , what are you waiting for?' hissed Stevens.

'Who's there?' Stevens recognized Jack’s voice. ‘Stay back, they're dangerous!'

'Professor is that you?' a girl's voice asked. 'Nuada and David have changed into ... ' Her voice was cut off by a growl of rage. Stuart heard the explosive outlet of gases as one of the tranquillizer darts

was unleashed.

'Protect yourselves,' Goibhnie advised. Stuart dropped to the earth, A huge shape ploughed forwards out of the darkness. Another of the darts was fired, not slowing the behemoth's advance at all. Stuart cringed, half in terror and half in helplessness, as he heard a strange electronic scream erupt from Goibhnie's throat. The monster flung itself from side to side, crushing the alien. One foot dug into the earth by Stuart's head sending splatters of mud - he hoped it was mud - across his face. Still Goibhnie screamed and Stuart found that he had backed up against the wall of the tunnel. He had to do something, despite his loathing of both the alien and the attacking monster. His hand closed around a bone - some distant part of his mind, locked in an anatomy lecture, reeled off 'fractured pelvis of immature stallion' -

and he prepared to use it as a weapon.

The message had gone ahead of them so that, when the Doctor and Dryfid arrived, the earth around the bases of the stones was already being removed.

'Careful!' cautioned the Doctor. 'If you don't know what you're doing with these things they can be terribly dangerous.' He was of the opinion that they were dangerous even when you did know what you were doing. If the silicon circuits were overloaded, for example by too many people travelling simultaneously, there could be some random mixing of conformations - unpleasant if you didn't enjoy looking like someone else. He stepped up to the first stone and examined its surface closely. It was like peering into infinite space with the light of distant, long burnt-out stars only just penetrating the night.

He pressed his fingers to the stone and the muscles of the distal phalangeal joints rippled almost inconsequentially - except that the lights within the stone winked out. He repeated the procedure with the other stone.

'They should be safe now,' he told the workers.

'Carry on!' 'Dryfid commanded. He stood back with the Doctor and watched the work proceed. One of the circle guards towards them bearing a roll of parchment.

Message from Captain Rhys, sir,' the man said. Dryfid reached out to take the message, but the fool released his hold too soon and it dropped to the floor. Dryfid bent to pick it

'Look out!' one of the labourers cried. The guard was moving forward. Bent over, Dryfid could only stumble backwards to avoid the flash of the weapon.

But it wasn't aimed at Dryfid. The Doctor parried the blade with his forearm and then his index finger stabbed out against his attacker's temple: The man slowed but wasn't hampered much by the blow. His fist slammed into the Doctor's side and sent him reeling to one side.

Knife clenched tightly, he followed on foot but the Doctor was ready this time. His fingers pressed into the skin above and below the guard's clavicle, felling him immediately. On the ground, his muscles twitched spasmodically.

Dryfid inched forward and peered down at the man's neck.

'A witch in our midst,' he sighed sadly, 'and how many more? He must be burnt.'

'No,' said the Doctor, but already men were moving forward splashing oil on the prone figure. And then a flame was touched to the oil. The flickering tongues spread quickly as the man began to thrash about. He pushed himself up with his arms and raised his face pleadingly to the Doctor. His skin bulged and grey tissue burst through, forming waving pseudopodia which strained to be free of the fire. The guard collapsed face down to the ground and his roasting arms embraced his head, stopping the protoplasm escaping. Finally he stopped moving.

'That was unnecessary,' the Doctor told Dryfid, but there was no anger in his voice. If anything, there had been a touch of calculating thoughtfulness.

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David struggled .to regain control of his aching muscles, stretched into terrible new permutations. From the direction of the tall figure he heard a sharp outlet of air, followed by a soft thud. As Nuada surged forward, his grip on David's mind suddenly released.

David's altered, animal eyes danced hungrily between the cowering forms of Jack and Ace. The creature within him, altered by congress with other creatures, had learnt certain principles - protect your own, and protect your home. The contact with Nuada had revealed something of Nuada's plans. He had originally hoped to transport the demons through to Earth, a rich hunting ground, in the midst of the men of Tír na n-Óg. But now the plan was changed, the pathway to Earth threatened, and no time could be lost. The Earth would suffer. And the Earth was David's home. He turned to face Nuada.

Almost as clear as the day, he could see the scattered remains of the centaurs. He had dragged them into the tunnel for Nuada

to absorb so that he could become the depraved monstrosity that swayed back and forth with the limp silver-suited figure clenched between the claws on his forefeet. Inspector Stevens lay in a daze alongside Nuada's heavy tail and another human crouched by the wall, fumbling with a piece of bone from which tattered shreds of muscle and tendon still hung.

David shivered inside, but the creature sprang forward and buried its teeth into Nuada' s neck. Nuada let out a roar of such pain and magnitude that David felt his eardrums bulge inwards - almost to

breaking point. The scream reverberated across the enclosed space.

Nuada dropped Goibhnie and struggled to flail round at the back of his neck. His first wild blow crashed into the wall of the tunnel crushing his hand to pulp. David dug his teeth further in and felt the warm spurt of blood against his palate. The muscles at the back of Nuada's neck tensed, squeezing at his jaw and in a rapid movement, he flung himself over on to his back, trying to flatten David. Still David gripped tightly: He found a foothold in the mud and tugged backwards. With a satisfying tearing of flesh, one of Nuada's vertebrae was ripped out with a chunk of soft tissue. Nuada stiffened, all the nervous pathways to his limbs cut off. Only his head still moved, and in its dying moments, it whipped round and crashed against David's skull, plummeting him painfully into unconsciousness.

Several of the Firbolg allowed themselves to be put into harness. The situation was so extreme that the capriciousness of horses could not be allowed to play any part. Thick ropes were passed around the stones and the Filbolg began to pull. The slippery mud, whilst hampering them to some extent, also facilitated the passage of the stones, and once speed was attained their own momentum kept them moving. As they were approaching the tunnel through the wall, Stuart and Stevens emerged, carrying the unmoving body of Goibhnie. Ace and Jack were close behind; between them they carried a distorted figure, half human, half beast. The Doctor hurried forward to meet them.

'Ace, what have you been up to?' he asked harshly, but not concealing the relief in his voice.

'Professor!' Ace ran to him and hugged him. The Doctor grinned in embarrassment 'Thanks for leaving me,'

'I knew you'd be all right. And that you'd get back here.'

'Who's this?' asked Jack.

'It's the professor. Professor this is Jack, and this is Inspector Stevens.'

'Yes, we've already met.'

'And this is David.' She pointed to the poor, deformed creature on the floor. The Doctor knelt by him and ran his fingers lightly across the altered flesh.

'Doctor,' Stuart said 'Goibhnie's injured. He was attacked by that thing in there.'

'But we need him,' the Doctor groaned. He turned to look at the people of Tír na n-Óg. Some of them were looking at David with fire in their eyes. 'Don't touch him,' he warned. 'I don't want him hurt.

Position the stones on either side of the entrance,' he commanded. He looked back at David.

'Can anything be done for him?' Ace asked.

‘He’s infected by Goibhnie’s protoplasmic material. His body and mind have been taken over by the alien presence.’

‘He’s possessed?’ asked Stevens. ‘Maybe I can help. I have some experience with these things.

Perhaps I could perform an exorcism?’

‘I haven’t got time to deal with him now,’ the Doctor told Ace. ‘Come with me, I’ll need your help.’

He led her over to the stones which were now in place. ‘Once I’ve reactivated the transmat device, you must keep your fingers pressed against it in the way that I will show you.'

'Dryfid!' he turned to the leader of the Tuatha. 'Send some men to be prepared to open the gates when I give the word.'

'Very well.'

'Now then ... ' The Doctor pressed his fingers against the stone. Doubt crept into his expression and he looked closely at the dark rock.

'Should something have happened?' Ace asked.

'Too many things to remember,' he complained. 'Without the keying code I'll need a power source to reactivate the stones.' A mighty crash came from the far end of the tunnel.

'They've nearly broken through, Doctor!' Stuart called.

'No time.' The Doctor searched his pockets. 'Nothing.' He strode over to Goibhnie. 'Goibhnie!' he whispered urgently. 'Goibhnie, how can I reactivate the stones? The keying code is different to the deactivation sequence.'

'Use ... ' Goibhnie's electronic voice was weak and distorted. 'Use the energy from my flyer.'

'There's no time to disconnect it and link it up again. The demons are almost through the gates.'

Goibhnie didn't seem to be listening. 'So much pain. Insufficient endorphin release. Doctor, will you supervise the Ternog experiment?'

'It can supervise itself. Goibhnie, show me the keying code. '

'Death,' whispered Goibhnie. 'An unexplored realm, uncharted, beyond empirical definition. If I could record the results, it would make a great experiment. Use the power pack from my respirator, Doctor.'

'Show me the keying code. We can take you over to the stones. '

'There is no keying code. I never anticipated having to reactivate them. Another fault in my technique. Still, the new procedure awaits.'

'If I can get you back to the TARDIS, I can give you medical treatment.'

There was an almost messianic gleam in Goibhnie's eyes. 'No time. Use it, Doctor.' His arms somehow found the energy to reach up and snap open the seals on his helmet, letting in a rush of the unfamiliar,

unfriendly atmosphere.

'This will provide excellent material for a research paper on the subject of mortality,' his unenhanced voice croaked weakly.

'Only medium material,' the Doctor said sadly. The Doctor looked at the alien's revealed face. It could almost be human but for the pale green tint of the skin and the gills waving weakly in the air. When they stopped moving, he reached into the suit and felt about for the respirator. It came loose easily.

'Goibhnie is dead?' asked Dryfid.

'I'm afraid so.' The Doctor hurried to the stones, rapidly disconnecting the power pack from the respirator. 'He did care for Tír na n-Óg.'

He pressed the power pack against the side of the first stone and let it discharge some of its energy.

The galaxy within the rock flared into life.

'Where shall we send them to?' the Doctor mused. He took out his pocket watch and flipped it open.

'Without Goibhnie the artificial sun will need some extra fuel to keep it going. I suppose ... ' Conflicting emotions raged in his mind. Wholesale destruction of life? Could it be justified? He raised his pocket watch and sighted along its diameter at the sun. It emitted a high-pitched bleep and a row of figures appeared on its small digital screen. He turned back to the stone and taking Ace's hands he positioned them on its surface.

'Keep them steady, no matter what happens.'

'Right you are, Professor.'

He hurried across to the other stone.

'They're through!' a voice called. The sound of baying howls echoed up the tunnel. The Doctor fumbled the power pack against the stone and released its package of energy. Just as the first demon, its jaws wide and claws outstretched, reached the mouth of the tunnel, he pressed his fingers against the stone, rediverting the flow of information. The rather surprised looking head and shoulders of the beast were carried forward, but the rest of it had vanished.

'Wicked!' shouted Ace, her enthusiasm momentarily getting the better of her.

'Keep still, Ace!'

The demons kept coming. A menagerie sewn together haphazardly. Gangling limbs with tough sinews and wiry tendons. A torso with a heart that bulged outside the ribs and thumped a triple beat.

Heads without nostrils and mouth, but with insect eyes. Claws readied for killing, stained yellow and red. Faces which might once have belonged to humans. All were disintegrated by the power of the

semiorganic silicate transfer device.

So eager to get into Dinorben were they that the ranks at the back pushed the front line forward to their doom. Not all of the demons came through, but the few that remained would be hunted down by the people of Tír na n-Óg. Some managed to get through the Doctor's trap when Ace allowed her position to be taken over by another because she had grown weary. In the brief moment when contact with the stone was lost, two demons had passed through - but the Firbolg had rapidly dealt with them with flashing swords.

At the end of two hours, it was over.

17:

... And Back Again

Old Davy sat on the bench outside the Black Swan and pondered on the meaning of change. This unfortunate turn of events was necessitated by the lack of a pint glass for him to concentrate on. When he had arrived at the pub that morning he had found it locked and shut and though he had gone round the back to try to summon Arthur he had had no success. Davy wondered briefly what he should do about this and had eventually gone across to the post office and bought himself a bottle of milk. It wasn't the same. Nor was the book which rested, unopened, upon his lap a normal feature. He would open it eventually and in his own time, however much of that he had left.

That afternoon he had seen Janet and Hugh out walking their dog. He hadn't seen them for some time, and he knew that memory could play tricks, but surely they shouldn't have looked so young? And their dog - as far as he could recall, they had had a black and white collie, not the hulking great Alsatian that had accompanied them. He'd greeted them all the same, and looked on curiously as they had examined the Doctor's police box.

Constable Hughes wasn't his normal self either. When Davy had brought up the matter of the stone that had been stolen from his wall, Hughes had hurriedly made excuses and left. Probably had a lot of more important work to do.

Davy pondered idly on changes and had even considered that maybe change might be heading his way too. He'd felt twinges in his chest recently but they could indicate anything. Perhaps he was heading for the ultimate change?

The Doctor and Ace, having escaped the grateful mob of Tír na n-Óg-ians, searched for the other people from Earth. As they walked, the Doctor explained all about Goibhnie.

'But,' asked Ace, when the Doctor had finished, 'how will Tír na n-Óg manage when the sun runs out of fuel again?'

'I'm not a panacea, Ace! I can't solve all their problems. Besides, I've given them about two thousand years' breathing space. If they're as canny as Tellurians, they'll be reaching to the stars by then. I don't foresee any difficulty.' He paused for a moment and looked about himself, felt the warmth of the sun as it should be instead of through the haze of excess carbon dioxide and depleted ozone. 'This world really is very pleasant at the moment. Something like the Earth of a few thousand years ago. It's almost a shame that industrialization will inevitably creep in.' He shook his head sadly and then walked on.

They found the Earth people in a small tent filled with the nickering light of candles. On a low trestle table, surrounded by dripping wax, lay David. There was a pleasant aroma of burning herbs which made the air seem slightly heavy.

'We should be going shortly,' the Doctor told them. 'Dryfid is eager to destroy the circle. Ace has given him some of her explosives and as soon as we've returned they'll finish it off.'

'There's still David to help,' Jack said. 'Inspector Stevens is going to perform an exorcism.'

Stevens greeted the Doctor. 'Book, bell and candle,' he said displaying the articles in question.

'Where did you get a copy of the Bible from?' Ace asked.

'It's Bathsheba's,' Stuart told her.

The Doctor looked around the tent. 'You haven't any holy water.'

'Do you think I'll need some?' Stevens asked anxiously.

'Not really, no.'

'Very good then. I think we've left it long enough. If you'd all move to the end of the tent. It would help, if you could pray with me. It doesn't matter what you pray, so long as you concentrate on freeing David from the demon possessing him.' He positioned them around the tent all looking towards David and then, kneeling at the foot of the table, he held the Bible to his chest and started to murmur prayers.

Ace tried to think of something suitable to communicate to a God that she had never really believed in despite, at some points in her life, wishing that He was there. She realized finally that, as with the faith that had driven back the Haemovores during World War Two, it wasn't important what you believed in but it was the mere act of wishing for David's recovery that was required: With this thought, she looked to the Doctor and saw that his lips bore a faint smile. She looked closer and saw how drained he appeared. Worried, and adding a silent prayer for the Doctor's recovery, she returned her attention to David and Inspector Stevens.

He placed the Bible on the table and began to ring the small bell above David's head. He raised his arms to the sky and called out. ‘Foul spirit, by the holy trinity I command thee to leave this soul in peace. Avaunt!'

The air seemed to thicken perceptibly and the noise from without was dampened. There was a feeling as of forces gathering at the periphery of the tent. Stevens rang the bell again and brought his hands slamming against his chest.

‘Avaunt ye, ghast,' he ordered. 'In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost I adjure thee -

go back when thou came from! I, Graham Stevens command it in the name of God!'

Was that a distant roll of thunder, bringing with it the promise of purification by fire and water? Ace sensed a presence writhing at the centre of the table, above David's chest.

‘Get thee hence!'

The Doctor suddenly raised his voice, screwed his eyes up tight and pressed his palms together like a child praying at the end of school. ‘From ghoulies and ghosties and long-leggety beasties and things that go bump in the night, good Lord, deliver us!’ he requested in his thickest Scottish brogue.

Immediately, all the tension dissolved back into the thin air 'I think that's quite enough of that,' he continued, opening his eyes. Let’s try this more scientifically. These protoplasmic beings are terribly primitive with no developed nervous system. That’s why they're such perfect symbiotes. Now, as David is unconscious, the protoplasm will be relying on its own instincts . . . which will lead it to be afraid of fire. So let's see if we can make it emerge with flames.' He took the candles and brought them up against the canvas of the tent. The fabric resisted at first, but then the fire took.

‘Are you sure about this, Doctor?' Ace asked:

'I'm sure that it will be rather more effective than the rudimentary hypnotic suggestion that Inspector Stevens was practising. I think you should all leave the tent. This could be dangerous.' There were no protests. The Doctor had great authority in his voice. Only Stevens, peeved at being so rudely cut off, lingered momentarily and then left.

When they were outside, the Doctor pressed his hands to David's chest. He could feel the creature writhing just below the diaphragm. As it withdrew its tendrils from throughout David's body, the boy was restored more and more to normality. The Doctor searched out the creature's primitive mind and detected a slight glimmering of telepathic power there. It was easy for the Doctor, who, ever since he had seen a world end in flames, had held a slight but very definite fear of fire, to generate enough of a telepathic picture for the creature to pick up and be afraid of.

The others waited outside and watched as the flames spread to the roof and finally engulfed the entire tent. Ace was on the verge of going in to save the Doctor when he erupted from the flames carrying David. He dropped the boy on the ground and then looked back as the tent collapsed in on itself.

'Ah well,' he sighed, flicking idly at a small, grey fleck adhering to his jacket, 'that could have been useful in the TARDIS.' Ace wondered what he was referring to.

They examined David where the Doctor had laid him. His skin was perhaps a bit loose-fitting, and there were welt marks on his stomach, but otherwise he looked normal.

'It worked!' Jack cried happily.

The Doctor was grim. 'It took some encouragement, but I didn't really doubt that it would work. He's asleep now, but he'll recover fully. Now we must go.'

Dryfid was waiting for them by the restored circle. With him, on a small stretcher, was Herne.

'You got him here,' the Doctor congratulated Dryfid.

'Yes, we followed your instructions and the soldiers took turns in carrying him.'

'None harmed?'

'No,' Dryfid confirmed.

'What are you talking about, Doctor?' Stevens asked.

'The chronons and antichronons being released by Herne can badly affect short-lived species if they are overexposed. Herne was carried here by about two hundred men, I should guess. I'll take him to the TARDIS and see if I can help him. Have you got the explosives, Dryfid?'

'They've got twenty-second fuses,' said Ace, 'so you should have plenty of time to get clear.'

'We shall destroy the circle as soon as you are gone,' said Dryfid, 'and it will herald a new era of peace between the peoples of Tír na n-Óg.'

'I think you may have to work harder than that,' the Doctor told him, 'but good luck, anyway.' He bent and picked up Herne with some effort.

Ace moved to help him. 'Are you all right, Professor?'

'Don't come too close, Ace, I don't want you affected. Well, goodbye, Dryfid, Bats.' The small girl waved to him with her good arm. 'Look after her, Dryfid.'

'I will, Doctor.' Dryfid had willingly taken the crippled girl under his wing as a surrogate for the family he had never had time to start with Wynne. 'Goodbye.'

The air shimmered as the Earth people left and then Dryfid planted the explosives at the bases of the keystones of the circle.

'Everybody get down,' the Doctor called. 'There'll be some feedback when the stones are destroyed.'

'What do you ... ?' Jack asked.

'Don't argue, just get down!' The Doctor flung himself to the ground just as the first shockwave crashed through the circle. The keystones began to fragment and then they too exploded. Ace covered her head against the rain of rock. One piece landed before her, and looking into the obsidian fragment she saw the light of ancient stars. Full of wonder, she took the stone and slipped it into her pocket.

'What the hell?' Stevens cursed. 'I think I've been hit. To think that I made it through a battle against demons without injury but get hit by an exploding rock. Is David all right?'

'I think so,' said Jack. He stood up and brushed himself down.

Stuart sat up rubbing his head. 'I think I must have cracked my head against a root.'

'Maybe you should get the Doctor to have a look at it.'

'I don't think you're that sort of doctor, are you, Doctor?' Stuart looked around the clearing but the small man had vanished. 'Doctor? Where's he gone?'

The Doctor and Ace hurried through the trees. The Doctor stumbled frequently because of the weight of Herne over his shoulder, but he refused Ace's offers of help. As they ran along the road Ace felt a sense of mounting dread. What had happened to Bat? She had felt no trace of the contact which had existed between them, and yet …

'There's something coming this way,' panted the Doctor. 'Hoofbeats!'

Ace's heart leapt at the sight of the group of Ceffyl heading towards them. The central one was Bat.

She reached out a hand and touched the stump that remained of the horn.

'Bat, are you all right?'

'Not exactly . .. the soldiers . .. not thorough . .. some horn left … will recover eventually ...'

'I'm so glad you're alive, Bat. When Emrys brought those horns, I thought ... well, what else could I think?'

'You ... the Doctor .. .'

'That's right. Can we keep moving?' The Ceffyl turned and followed the Doctor and Ace along the road.

'Professor, there's no way back for them. They're stuck here on Earth. What are they going to do?'

'We . .. shall survive … somehow ...'

'I'm not sure I share your confidence. I'll leave a message for Inspector Stevens, get him to contact UNIT. They'll help you.'

UNIT was an acronym for the United Nations Intelligence Taskforce, an international military organization which the Doctor had once worked for as scientific adviser. The Doctor still had many friends within UNIT and even Ace knew some of the top brass.

'Are you sure, Professor?'

'Oh yes, Lethbridge-Stewart is very fond of horses. And I'm sure that he has some pull still.'

'Thank ... Doctor . ..'

'That's all right, just try and keep out of trouble until then.'

They were at the gates now. 'This is Inspector Stevens's car, is it?'

'I think so. '

'Very silly, he's left the keys in the ignition. Not much a policeman.' He opened the door and pushed Herne inside. 'Say goodbye, Ace, and get in the back.'

'Goodbye, Bat, I'll always remember you.'

'And I ... you, Ace. You are . .. always with me. Goodbye!' Bat rejoined the remainder of her herd. The Doctor started engine as Ace got in.

'Let's hit the road.'

The Doctor turned the car round and then reversed so that he could have a good run at the gates. He put his foot down on the accelerator.

'Urn, Doctor, did you bother to …' Ace was jarred by the impact and the gates flew open. '…

check whether the gates were locked?'

Old Davy looked up from his book and struggled to his feet to look down the road towards Emrys's place. He'd heard the explosion earlier and now there was a car coming, It was a small, dark blue Astra which pulled to a halt alongside the police box. Ace climbed out of the back and went round to the driver' door.

'Are you sure you're all right, Doctor?' She sounded concerned.

'It's the TARDIS,' he answered, 'she's dying. No energy.' He struggled out of the car and looked across the road-junction at Old Davy.

'Siwt mai, Doctor?' Davy called.

'I need your help, Old Davy.'

Davy strolled across. 'What can I do for you, Doctor?'

'Help me carry this chap into the TARDIS.' Old Davy looked into the car and saw a faintly luminescent figure sitting there. His brow knitted as strange thoughts crossed his mind. 'Right you are, Doctor.' Together, they supported Herne whilst the Doctor fumbled with the door of the police box.

Ace stood behind them and wondered why the Doctor allowed Davy to help with Herne when she had already offered. Didn't he trust her to manage the job?

Inside the TARDIS looked awful. Its walls were dull and grey, drained of the vibrant light which had always suffused them. The roundels set into the walls were covered with hairline cracks and the central hexagonal console looked battered and worn as though centuries of erosion were working upon it. The a *ltered* light lent a ghastly pallor to the Doctor's face as he and Davy struggled in with Herne.

'Is this because of those block transfer computations?' asked Ace,

looking around at the damage.

'Partly. The regulatory equations have lost their power, they aren't maintaining the structure any more,' said the Doctor. He dropped Herne into the wicker chair and went to close the door. 'But it's worse than that. The TARDIS is dying. Everything needs energy. The TARDIS gets her energy from the Eye of Harmony on Gallifrey.'

'But that's ...'

'Duw mawr!' said Old Davy. In his astonishment, his fingers grew slack and let slip the book he had been reading. 'Never in all my life have I ...' A look of pain crossed his face. His shocked eyes turned towards Herne and there was a glimmer of recognition. 'I ...'

Ace picked up the book from where it had fallen and almost laughed at the title and the connection it made in her head: It had been immediately obvious to her that the Ceffyl were like unicorns, the Firbolg like centaurs and even, to an extent, that the Fomoir were similar to the trolls of old European legends; the Doctor's explanation of Goibhnie's experiment made the reasons for all that clear. When she had seen the representations of the Sidhe on the tapestries in Dinorben she had thought of them as fairies, but another name now sprung to mind: After all, they were small creatures and there could be no denial that they did have furry feet. As far as she knew though, they didn't live in holes in the ground ...

'Come on,' urged the Doctor, interrupting Ace's thoughts; 'I must restore the link with the Eye. Ace, give me that rock.

'What?' Ace remembered the fragment of stone that she had slipped into her pocket. She handed it to the Doctor. He took it eagerly and gazed into it. A faint flicker of light still hung there.

'There's still some residual functioning. Enough to restore the link. Now all I need is the correct connections - organic matter. Come on!' He ran his fingers along the dusty console. Davy s hands clutched at his chest.

'You all right?' Ace asked.

'There's nothing for it,' the Doctor decided. 'I'll have to dematerialize - hand over some of the computational capacity to what's left of the block transfer matrix.' He flicked switches.

'Doctor, there's something wrong with the old bloke. I think …'

On the oscillating column, a shape began to materialize. Not completely in phase with reality, it had the appearance of a cat but its body was fluid. It stretched and yawned, pixel teeth glinting unaccountably in the twilight. Supported by the cradle of the TARDIS's time rotor, it spun round and round, casually summing up the situation. It purred happily, content with its lot.

Old Davy gave a gasp as the dull pain seared into fire. He fell forward into Herne's lap, twisting as he did so. At the last moment,

Ace saw how similar their faces were in their separate agonies - they could almost be brothers, twins, or ... the same person.

There was a brilliant flash of light. It was the light of creation and left dazzling images dancing on Ace's retina. Before she could see properly, it was evident that Old Davy and Herne were no longer within the TARDIS. The same person? One travelling forwards, the other backwards through time until the turning point? But how? She thought of the book again and then wondered if the idea for the social experiment that was Tír na n-Óg had been Goibhnie's after all. At last she saw the grey mass of tissue quivering on the chair. She recoiled from the remnants of Goibhnie's experiment in disgust.

'You've come,' the Doctor said. Was he talking to that? Ace turned and found that it was the cat he was addressing. 'Lynx,' he said again.

The time column rose up out of its central position within the console, supported on a shaft of black light. The cat grinned, capering round and round, creating a swirling column in the blackness.

Gently, the Doctor tossed the rock fragment into the swirling vortex produced by the feline's motion.

'What good's that then?' asked Ace.

The Doctor looked at her sternly. 'Watch!' he said.

The rock hung, suspended under the transparent rotor, still lacking connections. The cat pounced, digging its claws into Goibhnie's protoplasmic material.

'It's ideal, I suppose,' said the Doctor. 'As part of Herne, it's had some experience of time stress so the TARDIS's functioning shouldn't affect it too badly.'

The cat cut the material into strips and flung them into the chaos at the TARDIS's heart. One by one they attached to the rock fragment, grew, linked up. Slowly the light within the console room grew brighter, more healthy. The TARDIS was being restored as quanta of energy spurted in through the growing link with the Eye of Harmony.

But at the same time as the energy surged, the cat became less and less in synch with Ace and the Doctor's continuum. Parts of it faded in and out of existence, shimmering and deliquescing.

'What's happening to it, Professor?' Ace asked. She looked closely at him. Just as the TARDIS was being supplied with energy, he too seemed to be shedding the burden which had been weighing him down.

He stretched catlike, and then brushed the accumulated dust of his journey from his jacket. With some irritation, he flicked at a particle on his lapel, sending. it slowly tumbling into the dark vortex. The single atom of Goibhnie's aborted experiments fell towards the TARDIS's biomechanical core like a moth drawn to a lamp in Central

Park at midnight. The cat's happy purring stopped but, engrossed with the lights and dials of the console, the Doctor failed to notice.

The last part of the protoplasm joined the waving mass under the time column which then sank down into place. The lights of the console flickered for a moment and then shone brightly.

'The TARDIS is just running a few tests of the systems circuitry, checking that the link-up is stable.'

Ace felt a warm glow in her being as the telepathic field of the TARDIS reached out to enclose her -

she'd hardly noticed its absence before, but its presence was reassuringly like contact with Bat. The cat's body had vanished completely now.

'No, Professor, what's happening to the cat?'

'The TARDIS is very nearly restored to full functioning. The organic microcircuitry, the link with the Eye of Harmony all repaired.'

Only the cat's teeth were visible. A shaft of light sparkled on the long canines. In a final movement the mouth opened wide; Ace sensed that it was somehow trying to yowl a warning but lacking a throat, no sound emerged.

'Professor! The cat!'

'The TARDIS's survival circuits are still linked up to the block transfer system, still image-coding the cat,' the Doctor told her as he leant over the console. Ace realized that he hadn't seen and, for now, thought it best not to worry him. 'That is the only part of the functioning that needs to be restored -

turned over to normal systems.' He reached out and flicked a switch. 'And it is done.' The teeth vanished abruptly.

'But, Doctor, the cat, what's happened to it?'

The Doctor ran his fingers lightly over the console of his restored TARDIS. The TARDIS ran her console over the fingers of her restored Doctor. Deep in the heart of the block transfer matrix, the last remnants of the calculation which had been the cat were frozen in eternity in a mathematical cat's cradle

- just in case they ever needed to be recalled.

'Don't worry about the cat,' the Doctor reassured her, seeing the still-concerned expression on her face. He patted the console fondly. 'She's gone to a good home.'

'Spare no sympathy for those creatures. They were witches, they deserved to die.'

A coach crashes on the M40. All the passengers are killed. The bodies carry no identification; they are wearing similar new clothes. And each has a suitcase full of banknotes.

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